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My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"Even If We Aren't Dating..."



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A Day in the Life of the Ex-Couple

“How should I spend Golden Week?”

What a masterpiece. I closed the paperback book that I’d just finished reading and took a little time to admire the cover illustration before squeezing it against my chest.

I let out a sigh and gazed at the ceiling above my bed, daydreaming about countless scenes. As each one formed and subsequently faded, I stored them all inside me as priceless treasures. What a blissful process it was!

It was currently the afternoon on the second day of Golden Week. My social status had done a one-eighty in just a year, and suddenly I found that my reading time had been shaved away by the time I spent with friends. That’s why, for this holiday week, I planned to do nothing but pore through all the books that had piled up.

Little had I known that I’d be met with an extremely beautiful tale when I picked up the second book on my list.

I want to talk with someone about it. I want to share my feelings with someone and, if I can be so greedy, I want them to feel the same about it too!

To my great chagrin though, none of the friends I’d made were readers like me. I *did* have the option to fish for reviews online, but I didn’t really want to since the last time I’d done that, reading the comments hadn’t left me in the best of moods. No, discussing a book face-to-face was by far the best.

I tried thinking about what I used to do in these kinds of situations, and as I fell into my thoughts, a certain guy’s face popped up. *Oh right, back then, I didn’t have this problem. How nice—* This thought was interrupted by the realization that the guy I used to talk about books with lived under the same roof as me.

“I-I guess I *have* to...”

I really had no other choice. By process of elimination, I was simply left with no other option than *him*. Yes, it was inevitable due to process of elimination.

I glanced at his room, which was next to mine, but he wasn’t there. I walked down the stairs to the living room and found the guy I was looking for—Mizuto Irido, my little stepbrother and...my ex-boyfriend. He was slouched over, vacantly gazing at the TV. He seemed extremely bored.

“What are you doing...?” I asked while hiding the book I’d brought down behind my back.

“I read all the books I have at home. I wanted to go buy more, but it’s too windy out, so I gave up on that.”

Even now, the living room windows were rattling loudly against the wind. It may not have been as bad as it’d get during typhoons, but it *was* strong enough that its whooshing about was clearly audible.

This wind isn’t that bad. What are you, the little engine that couldn’t? But then again, it wasn’t as if I’d like to go out in this wind either. I’d stayed holed up inside because I didn’t want to deal with my hair getting messed up.

Wait, is this my chance? How often did he get so lethargic after running out of books to read? It happened *maybe* once a month. *If I let this chance slip me by, I may never have another chance to get him to even look at any of my book recommendations. I-It’s now or never!*

“O-Oh, is that right?”

I tried to play it cool and sat a little bit of a distance away from Mizuto. He watched me as I did, skeptically furrowing his brow. I continued to act naturally, nonchalantly twirling my hair with the hand that wasn’t holding the book. *Stay calm. Stay calm and just casually...*

“Well, if you’re so bored,” I muttered, “I guess I wouldn’t mind lending you a book.”

Perfect! That was so natural! There was nothing off about it—not a single thing! I deserve an Oscar for that performance!

“What are you up to?” Mizuto asked, the creases in his brow increasing.

“H-Huh? N-Nothing!” I turned away so that he couldn’t see my face. *There’s no need to interrogate me!*

Mizuto was certainly suspicious of my behavior, but regardless, he said, “Well, I guess anything is better than being bookless.”

“E-Exactly! We don’t get to relax like this very often!”

“Then I guess I’ll go pick out a random boo—”

“Here!” I pulled out the book that I’d concealed until now and thrust it in front of him. “Take this! It’s really good!”

“O-Okay...” Mizuto reflexively accepted the book.

It might have been a little aggressive on my end, but he *did* take it, so no harm, no foul.

Mizuto adjusted his sitting posture and looked at the front cover while playing with his bangs. He then flipped the book over to give the summary a quick read.

“Skimming it, it looks like a pretty generic mystery novel.”

“Oh yeah, so—” I was about to enter an enthusiastic explanation of the book before I quickly stopped myself.

I-I want to tell him! I want to tell him why it's so good, but I also want him to experience it blind! It's definitely more interesting that way! Then again, he might not read it if he doesn't know how good it gets...

"Wh-Whatever! Just read it!" What I'd ended up with after mulling over the various solutions to this dilemma was yelling at him while hanging my head. *Ugh, how have humans not developed a coping method for this sort of situation?!*

"I'm not really following what's going on here, but...okay, I'll read it." The confusion on Mizuto's face had yet to leave, but he still opened the book and began moving his eyes across the pages, turning them one by one with his slender fingers.

He flipped past the introduction of the main characters in the novel and turned to the prologue. I closely observed my little stepbrother's face from the side as he began reading.

"Do you mind? I can't read like this."

"O-Oh, s-sorry. I'll give you space!" I shot to the edge of the couch in a panic—I *really* didn't want to interrupt him—and continued staring at him.

"All right then..." he said through a grimace.

I continued watching his face. Right in front of me, he was slowly going deeper and deeper into the story with each turn of a page. I held my breath, feeling myself being pulled in too. I remembered when I'd read what he was reading now and tried to picture what he was imagining. And in the blink of an eye, he'd flipped through a third of the book.

It was faint, but I heard Mizuto gasp as he read the first twist. He was getting more and more hooked.

Just as my lips curled into a smile, Mizuto's eyes flew in my direction. I quickly covered my mouth with my hand and shook my head in silence.

Mizuto's gaze dropped back to the book as he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. Behind him, the sun had begun to set, tinging the room orange.

He turned page after page, his pace getting faster and faster with each turn. Meanwhile, Mizuto's posture hadn't changed one bit. He'd completely lost himself in the book and forgotten about his physical body.

Before I'd even realized it, he'd gotten through over half of the book. There must've only been a third or so left at this point.

"Ah." Just then, a sound that wasn't pages being turned rang through the living room for the first time since he'd opened the book. It was Mizuto. His eyes widened and sparkled with a glow of understanding. Out of the corner of his eye, I nodded in approval. He'd reached the part where the author laid his intentions bare.

Suddenly, Mizuto was a man on a mission with how he continuously turned the pages. With only about a quarter of the book left, he'd finally entered the solution arc where the truth behind everything would be revealed, but then he froze in the middle of turning a page.

"Huh?" I let out a sound of confusion as Mizuto began flipping back to a previous page. *What are you doing?*

He reread a scene then closed the book around his index finger, using it as a bookmark. Then he leaned back against the couch and looked up at the ceiling while muttering something.

H-He's making his own deductions before the solution arc!

I'd never met anyone who read mystery novels like this before. Even when we'd been together, I'd never *ever* seen him do this even once. I'd always thought that I was the faster reader, but was it possible that he'd just get hung up on stuff like this? Was that the only reason he was slower?

"So *that* happened, and because of that... Ah!" After about ten minutes, Mizuto's eyes flung wide open, and he dove back into the book, flipping to the previous page, and then furiously nodded his head. It seemed like he'd figured it out. That was fast.

With that out of the way, he finally continued to read the conclusion of the book. I did my best to keep myself from grinning. *Just a little. Just a liiittle more.*

"Huh?" His eyes widened in complete and utter surprise. "H-Huh? Huh?! Huh! Huuuh!!!"

It was hard to tell whether he was screaming and clutching his head in actual confusion or because he understood what was going on.

He'd probably fallen for the huge misdirection that the author had perfectly set up. People who theorized wildly might feel betrayed, but if they were to go back through the book with all the answers, they'd see just how clever the author had been.

Right now, it was written across Mizuto's face that the author had gotten him. It almost made me jealous. After reading a little more, Mizuto fell into complete silence. I'm not even sure if he breathed until the last few pages.

He very reluctantly and slowly turned the last page of the chapter and reached the afterword. At long last, he'd finished the book. He leaned back against the couch, sinking into it as if all the strength had left his body. He gazed at the ceiling, staring at it as if he was getting lost in its expanse. Finally, a sigh escaped from his mouth.

"So...how was it?" I could already tell how he felt about it, but I figured I should still proceed with caution.

Mizuto turned his gaze to the cover of the book. "It's a masterpiece."

Ah. Music to my ears.

“What is this?” he said, getting worked up. “I’ve never seen this even mentioned on the internet. How have more people not talked about it?! What’s the matter with people?!”

“Yeah, I know, right?!”

“The story, the characters, the tricks, the logic—all of it was so carefully laid for the conclusion. The writing never dragged on either. It just flowed so well; it was so easy to read! But then the latter half was so intense that I felt like I couldn’t breathe.”

“Yes! Exactly!” I excitedly jumped up, moving closer to Mizuto. “The entire tone of the book seamlessly transitioned between the first and second half! After you finish reading it, you look back and realize how witty the beginning was and how even the super generic-sounding summary is actually deeper than you thought!”

“Precisely! When I first read it, I was all like, ‘what’s this generic-sounding summary doing in a place like this?’”

“Right?!” I nodded excitedly. “I had absolutely zero expectations going into it.”

“Yeah, and there was that foreshadowing at the beginning, remember? In the prologue.”

“Oh yeah, that!”

Mizuto opened the book back up. I moved closer to him until our shoulders touched so I could see too.

“Uh...this, right?” He pointed to the page. “The part that depicts the psyche of the perpetrator.”

“Yeah, there’s that, but there’s also something on the next line. This part.”

“Huh? Oh, wha— That’s what this meant?!”

The sky outside had gone dark, but we hadn’t noticed at all. After our parents came back, we had dinner, took our baths, and then we just kept poring over the book. We ended up reading it a second time; we didn’t end up going to bed until after two in the morning.

When I woke up at my usual late time, I messaged Akatsuki-san and the others on LINE and made plans to hang out. As we chatted, all I could think about was yesterday. It was the most fun I’d had in a while. Time had completely disappeared as I gushed about a book I liked as much as I wanted to, and I’d never forget it. The warmth from that memory was almost like small fireworks going off all across my body.

In the past, this had been how every day was. It had only stopped after I had made a certain decision.

“All right, see you at the station at noon,” I replied to Akatsuki-san’s message, then looked at the outfit I was wearing.

Yep, not bad. Even I thought it was a little weird for me to always be wearing long skirts, but short skirts were too embarrassing. Pants would be too drastic a change; people might think I was trying to change my image. *Well, Akatsuki-san has told me I'd look good in pants...on more than one occasion too.*

I grabbed my purse and went downstairs. Just as I did, Mizuto came down behind me as if he was following me, his bedhead in full effect. My little stepbrother, donning a gray sweatshirt, then lay his sleepy eyes on me.

"Going out?" he asked.

"Yeah, I have friends, unlike you."

"Uh-huh."

As soon as I felt like something was off by his short questioning, I noticed a book in his hand. *For as hard as he is to understand, he's very easy to see through.*

I pretended to not notice the book he was carrying and instead said, "How about you hang out with someone too? What about Kawanami-kun?"

"Nope. I'm good," he said like he was uninterested, opening the door to the living room.

"Oh, okay," I said, walking to the entrance. "When I get back..."

"Huh?"

"Lend me a book too. It's not fair otherwise." *Maybe that book you're holding right now.*

There was a pause. I didn't turn around to look, so I wasn't sure how he was reacting, but after a little, he quietly responded, "I'll think about it."

I slightly—*very, very* slightly—smiled and then walked towards the front door while saying something that I'd never said when we were dating: "I'll be back home later."

"I'll be here."

The Ex-Couple Change Seats

“Zero point thirty-three percent...”

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-called girlfriend during eighth and ninth grade. More specifically, I had a girlfriend from September of the eighth grade until March of the ninth grade—approximately nineteen months. We’d spent the first seven months of our relationship as normal classmates. *Seven* whole months.

Every student in Japan knows what this means. During those seven months that Yume Ayai and I had dated, we’d changed our seats approximately seven times.

The reason I say “about” is because I’m a little hazy on whether or not we changed seats during the holidays in December and March. Regardless, during all that shuffling, the seating chart had only placed us next to each other one time. For just one whole month out of the entire time that we were in school, there’d been less than a meter separating us in class.

I, being in the position I am in now, can say “big whoop,” but to my past self, that month had apparently been nothing short of an unanticipated stroke of good fortune. Looking back through my old notebooks showed how messy my notes were back then. That had everything to do with the fact that I’d get distracted in class, leaving me little to no time to hurriedly scribble down whatever was on the blackboard before the teacher erased it.

The distraction didn’t come from us whispering to each other. No, we were far too socially awkward to do that. All we had actually done was small things, like catching each other’s gazes or pretending to hand over an eraser that the other dropped so that we could touch fingers, or passing each other notes instead of letters. I’d love to know what was so fun about doing that, and I’d love to ask why we couldn’t have just texted each other instead if all we were gonna do was talk to each other.

Then again, I suppose that the enjoyment came from watching the other person’s expression while they read the notes that we covertly exchanged... But seriously, what was so fun about that?!

All of that nonsense ended after a month. As was customary for our class, when the end of the month came, we’d draw lots and change seats accordingly, effectively separating the two of us. Taking

into account the fact that there were five seats by the window in a class of thirty students, the likelihood of sitting next to the same person twice in a row was around zero point thirty-three percent. That was still much higher odds than becoming stepsiblings with your ex, but still. The odds of either happening at all were *astronomically low*.

There's no particular meaning to why I have these calculations on hand, so don't read into it. I was just a normal middle schooler who immediately wanted to put what I learned in school to use.

At any rate, the weekly homeroom we were in back then meant that it was time to say goodbye to sitting next to Ayai. Our teacher had prepared lots for us to draw in order. Just as Ayai stood up to draw a lot after the person diagonally in front of me finished drawing, she said in a voice so low I could barely hear it, "U-Um..."

If memory serves me correctly, that had been the first time I'd heard Ayai speak to me in class, making me understandably surprised.

"Huh?" I was confused. She was basically a stranger to me in the classroom, and yet she called out to me. People who don't have any problems conversing with others might not understand, but for someone as timid as Ayai (excluding her present self with a terrible personality), this was akin to a death sentence.

"U-Uh, s-sorr—" But before she could finish apologizing, she rushed up to grab a lot, leaving me without a chance to say a single thing to her.

Since I knew a thing or two about the psyche of poor communicators, I had tried to ask her what she wanted to say during class on our way out, but she just shrugged it off and insisted that it was nothing. It didn't take a genius to tell that it *wasn't* nothing though.

The thing about people who aren't great at communicating is that they're really stubborn when it comes to expressing themselves. So that's why I didn't press the issue and never touched the subject ever again. This event was so insignificant and trivial that even someone with high investigative power like Ukyo Sugishita would have ignored it, but somehow, I could never forget it.

I could tell at a glance that she was nervous—she was so tense that her face was flushing red. She was clenching her hand tightly as if she was trying to squeeze out courage, but for some reason the pinky on her right hand was standing up. Then she looked up at me with expectant eyes like she wanted me to do something. What had she been trying to tell me?



"All right, like I said before we went on break, in today's weekly homeroom, we'll be changing seats."

The teacher's words were met with a resounding sound of approval and excitement from the students. *Good grief. What are you all so excited about? You're just sitting your butt in a new seat. I'm jealous of how you guys can enjoy things so easily.*

I'd normally be thinking things like that, but not this time. *Just this time, I was so happy, I couldn't hide it.*

It'd been a month since we'd started school here. Up until now—the day after Golden Week—we'd been stuck sitting in alphabetical order according to our last names, but that was all about to change. The tide was about to shift, and I was about to be free from the nasty girl sitting behind me. What an auspicious day today was!

All of the atrocities of her doing I'd had to endure—having my chair kicked, having my neck stabbed by her mechanical pencil, her stupid “war tactic” of whispering to me whenever I got called on in class—I'd finally be free from all of it! I could hear them now: the bells of freedom were ringing, signaling the end of my days stuck in this ungodly hell. Could we make today a national holiday? We could call it the “Seating Change Anniversary.”

“Don't you look happy.” A sharp whisper from behind me cut through my thoughts.

Oh wait, no, the sharpness I felt came from the mechanical pencil I was being stabbed with—a crime committed by my little stepsister, my ex, and my classmate, Yume Irido.

But I couldn't help but laugh, because this was one of the last tests I'd have to endure. Whatever shitty god out there put me through this pain sure did underestimate the hell out of me! Victory was going to be mine this time around! By enduring this trial to its end, I'd prove the strength of humans!

“Hey, say something already!”

I had the pride of the human race on my back, and right now, she was unleashing a flurry of pointy pokes into it...and it was starting to hurt.

I looked up and saw that our first-period teacher wasn't in the classroom yet, so I took out my phone under my desk and sent her a message over LINE.

(09:02) Me: Hey, sadistic girl, did you miss the day when they taught us not to stab people in the back?

The flurry of stabs stopped. In their place, a response came.

(09:03) Yume: Oh, I'm sorry. That isn't test material, so I didn't take any notes.

(09:03) Me: You should take a class in morality.

(09:04) **Yume:** Not one in biology? Knowing how to deal with swine seems like it might come in handy.

Her message came packaged with a pink, crying pig. My eyes twitched.

(09:05) **Me:** Oh, my bad. That isn't test material, so I didn't take any notes.

(09:05) **Yume:** Huh?

(09:06) **Me:** I never studied how to write Japanese in a way that orangutans like you could understand.

“O-Orangu—?!”

I tried to stifle a smirk as I heard a soft scream of shock from behind me.

(09:07) **Yume:** Don't get so full of yourself.

(09:07) **Me:** Oh no, an elementary student's gotten ahold of a phone. Run!

(09:07) **Yume:** You think you can act like this just because your grade in modern Japanese was a little better than mine?

(09:08) **Me:** Your praise is most welcome, Ms. Number One on the Entrance Exam, Yume Irido.

I was immediately met with the loud sound of her foot colliding with my seat. A little while ago, we'd compared our entrance exam scores, and the only subject in which there was a noticeable disparity in points was modern Japanese. I had a full ten points on her, making it my complete victory.

In most cases, students who liked reading had a sense of pride when it came to their modern Japanese grades (source: me). Apparently, the results of the test really cut Yume deep, to the point that me simply bringing it up would put her in a sour mood...which conversely put me in a *great* mood.

“Sorry, I'm late!”

Before she could send another message, our first-period teacher burst into the room ten minutes past the bell. I guess that meant that I'd won this LINE battle. *I can just see that pitiful girl's face now.* Just as I was about to pocket my phone, I felt it buzz again.

(09:11) **Yume:** Hey

That was the entire message. That was it. Confused, I glanced over

my shoulder to look at Yume, but she'd already returned to her "serious student" mode with her textbook and notebook open on her desk. Her phone was nowhere in sight.

Was she trying to say something? Did she stop because the teacher was coming? As people having a last name near the top of the alphabet, we were destined to always be in the first few seats at the start of school, meaning that having our phones out was nearly impossible. That was why we had a rule that neither of us would so much as touch our phones during class. We couldn't endure the embarrassment of having both our phones confiscated in front of the class.

But seriously, what *was* she trying to say?

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious, but our teacher was starting to erase the blackboard, so I shifted my focus to that instead.

As soon as the bell rang, the atmosphere of the classroom became lax. It was the sound that signaled that morning classes were over. Approximately thirty students (I'm not gonna bother trying to remember the exact number) stood up and began moving around. In their hands were lunch boxes and wallets. Then, like it was the most natural thing in the world, they began inviting their friends to eat lunch with them.

What? Can't even eat a meal by yourself?

This was the kind of juvenile thought that'd usually be floating around in my head, but not today. After all, today was the joyous Seating Change Anniversary. I unwrapped my lunch box and silently joined my hands together in thanks for my meal.

I was thankful—very much so, since one of the cons to living with a single dad was the fact that most of your meals came prepackaged from either the school or a convenience store. But ever since Yuni-san had become my stepmother, she'd been strangely proactive about making lunches, ensuring that every morning, there'd be a lunch for me and Yume.

We'd tried to tell her that she didn't have to go out of her way to make lunch for me, but according to her, it had always been her dream to make lunch for her growing son, and then she'd jokingly tack on "growing daughter too." She really did seem like she was enjoying herself, so both Yume and I had decided to just leave it at that and not say anything more. In reality though, there was a separate reason we wanted her to stop making our lunches.

"Hey, bud. You sure do love to make a guy wait, huh?" Standing there was a frivolous-looking brunet holding sweet bread and a carton of lemon tea. It was Kogure Kawanami, my self-proclaimed friend. He looked inside my lunch box and grimaced at its contents.

“Eating like a king today again? So, this is what Irido-san’s eatin’ too, huh?”

“Knock it off, creep.”

That’s right, our lunches were exactly the same. Even though there was no real way of avoiding this, it didn’t stop us from instinctually reacting negatively to it. It was simple, really; we didn’t want people to look at us eating the same food and think we were close.

Admittedly, we both knew that this was extremely childish of us, which is why we never told Yuni-san, but...maybe in an effort to ensure that our lunches weren’t compared, Yume often made a conscious effort to have lunch somewhere that wasn’t this classroom.

I had no intention of stepping outside of this classroom for lunch. Why should I have to uproot myself for *her* sake?

“All right then,” Kawanami said, clapping his hands together. “Let’s get this food party started.”

“Yeah, okay. After all, she always makes my portion one and a half times bigger than Yume’s...”

“She must think that all high school boys eat a lot—even skinny little bookworms like you.”

“I guess I do *try* to finish everything.”

“Cuz you’re trying to be considerate to your new mom... Not that I know what that’s like. I’ve only had one in my lifetime,” Kawanami said, picking up a cherry tomato and tossing it into his mouth before grinning disturbingly.

“I bet even Irido-san sees you in a different light after seeing how you eat every last thing in your lunch box. She’s probably like, ‘Wow, he really is a guy!’ If I can help make it happen, then I’m happy to partake in your lunch as many times as you need me to.”

“Wow, thanks. I’d be even happier if she wasn’t *right behind me*.”

I felt her cold, piercing glare on the back of my neck. It was like Yume was surveying it and noting its most vulnerable point. *Am I about to die?*

“Yume-chan, let’s have lunch together!” a cheerful voice rang out from behind Yume.

I could see a ponytail bobbing from the corner of my eye. *Oh god, it’s Akatsuki Minami! I need to hide!*

“Sure. Where are the others?”

“They all have club things to do, apparently. Crazy, right? I don’t even know what club I wanna join yet. What about you, Yume-chan?”

“I...still haven’t decided whether or not to join one.”

“Even after we went ’round and looked at all those clubs, I’m still not really into any of them. Honestly, Golden Week’s already over, so it’s not gonna be easy to sign up now. Hm, what to do...”

Huh? You two checked out clubs? This is the first time I'm hearing about it. What are you doing walking around with that psycho?

"Hey, little stepbro, the look on your face is kinda scary," Kawanami ribbed.

"*Big stepbro,*" I quipped back, stuffing a nugget of fried chicken into my mouth. It was delicious. Whenever Yuni-san made it for dinner, Yume and I would always fight over it. In other words, it was a battleground ill-suited for scrubs.

"Anyways, looks like it's just the two of us today, Yume-chan! What do you wanna do? Wanna go somewhere we can be alone?"

Then, in a low voice that only I could hear, Minami-san said "We're gonna be alone. You jelly?" while jabbing me.

Like hell I'd be "jelly," I internally snapped back at her. I took another bite of my chicken. *Delicious.*

Then again, Yume being alone with Minami-san was certainly dangerous. It was completely within the realm of possibilities that Minami-san might slip Yume something... Not that I really cared what might happen to her, but I wouldn't want our parents to grieve over her. If I wanted to prevent that, I needed to think...

"What, Minami, no friends today?" Just as an ingenious plan was beginning to form in my head, Kawanami spoke up, beating me to the punch. "Then why not eat with us? This is the last time we can sit like this, y'know? How about we live it up and make this into some kinda lunch date?"

A...what? All of our eyes turned to Kawanami after his completely unexpected suggestion, but Kawanami only gave me a wink. *Gross.*

"Huh? You're just using this opportunity to try and get close to Yume-chan. You're such a creep!" Minami-san was the first to react and used the killer phrase that was afforded to girls her age. "You're *such* a creep," she repeated.

This one phrase had an unfair ability that was usually enough to knock out most guys and put them in the dirt, but her opponent today was none other than the ultimate weapon, Kogure Kawanami. There he stood, unscathed by the attack that would have felled many.

"Well rest assured, I've got no interest in that. After all, I am an expert ROM when it comes to romance."

"Say what?"

"A Read-Only Member. It means I only observe. That's what I find most enjoyable."

"Hm. So you're pretty much just a Peeping Tom?"

Uh-oh, Minami-san's tone of voice lowered a bit. She was usually chipper to the point that I doubted her sanity, but I guess even the strangest things can happen. Yume sometimes talks in that tone too.

"I don't trust people that easily," she said, narrowing her eyes,

“especially not *you*, Kawanami.”

“Did Kawanami-san do something in the past?”

“Yeah, Yume-chan! So, in middle school, this guy—”

“Wait, wait! There’s no need to talk about me!”

“If you don’t like it, then you can shut right up instead of trying to enter this garden of maidens.”

I guess this was the advantage that Minami-san had over Kawanami. *All right, your move, Kawanami. How are you gonna get out of this?*

I’d suddenly become a spectator. I watched as Kawanami gritted his teeth. A pained expression spread across his face, like he was a chess player who was in a rough spot, but after a while, he opened his mouth once more.

“Fine, then how about we take this opportunity to all get to know each other better? Let’s eat lunch together and *all* chat about our time in middle school, huh?”

The three of us all went quiet at the same exact time. What was this guy thinking? There wasn’t a single one of us here that didn’t have something they wanted to forget about from middle school.

“O-Oh, our time in middle school, huh?” Minami said nervously.

“I-I’d be fine doing that, but I’m worried about Yume-chan...”

“N-No, I wouldn’t mind, but my little stepbrother, he—”

“Nah, I’m good too... Not that I have anything fun to share.”

See?! You’re like an overly confident person who orders the one weird thing on the menu! Take it back! Look at me and understand what I’m trying to tell you! But Kawanami for some reason was just grinning ear to ear.

“Great! Then we don’t have to talk about middle school. Let’s just have lunch together.”

Both Minami-san and I realized what he’d just done, but Yume clearly didn’t, because she said, “Oh, okay, then let’s do that.”

“Awesome!” Kawanami stood up and pushed some nearby desks together.

Did Kawanami just use the door-in-the-face technique?! It’s a commonly known negotiation tactic where you make an outlandish request to get the other party to accept your initial request since you already seemingly made a concession. With this technique, it’s also easier to make the other party feel bad about rejecting your previous offer, making them more open to accepting your new offer... Or so said a book on psychology that I’d read before.

Kawanami had definitely employed this technique. He’d noticed that both Minami-san and I were weary, so he’d targeted the unsuspecting Yume. *Not bad, Kawanami.*

Unbeknownst to Yume, Minami-san and Kawanami were each

shooting each other looks. For Minami-san, it was one of bitter defeat, but for Kawanami, it was one of proud victory... And that's how the unlikely group of four that was us came to sit together.

Minami-san sat in front of me, Kawanami sat next to me, and Yume sat diagonally to my right. The fact that the guys were on one side and the girls were on the other seemed natural enough, but our seating was definitely more instinctual and came out of our latent desires to not have to face certain people.

"Sitting in front of you during lunch is like a whole new perspective!" Minami-san said to me.

"Uh, yeah...I guess."



Gone was the anguished face of a sore loser, and in its place was a bright smile. The reason my response to her sounded so awkward wasn't because I was uncomfortable around girls, but because there was a certain *situation* between the two of us that Yume hadn't picked up on. But I guess even if she hadn't picked up on it, she still had something to complain about.

Just as I started to feel her cold gaze on me, I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. When I pulled it out, I saw that I'd gotten a message from Yume.

(12:38) Yume: Just 'cuz she's a little nice to you doesn't mean you can ogle her. Back off, creepy bookworm!

I wanted to reply "it takes one to know one, sister," but where was the art in that? Instead, I decided to respond with something else.

(12:39) Me: Thank you for the warning. However, unlike a certain someone, I am not a person who falls for someone from just a little kindness. Regardless, I appreciate your concern. Have a pleasant day.

What a perfectly polite response. I might have used up all the politeness inside of me. *Thank god for predictive text.*

Meanwhile, no sooner than she'd lowered her gaze, glancing down past her desk, Yume's shoulders began to shake. *Oh, yeah, it's working. She's so mad.* Unlike Minami-san and Kawanami though, we couldn't bicker in public. We couldn't even *glare* at each other! It was too good! I had to hold back laughter!

Just as Yume was about to compose a reply, Kawanami called out to her. "I don't think we've hung out too much, Irido-san, have we?"

Nice assist, Kawanami! A friend in need is a friend indeed.

"Huh? O-Oh, yes, now that you mention it, I suppose that's true."

"Because a frivolous guy like you has no place getting close to Yume-chan!" Minami-san chided. "This is a onetime thing, Kawanami!"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm grateful for even this slight amount of time."

As the conversation tilted more towards Kawanami and Minami-san, I saw Yume's gaze once again fall beneath her desk. *Here it comes.*

"Oh, yeah, I've been meaning to ask, but what do you do when you're at home, Irido-san?" Kawanami pressed.

"Ah."

(12:40) Yume: That wasn't just "a little kindness."
Back in m

She ended up sending a half-written response. *What was she gonna say? "Back in my day?" When did you become such a geezer?*

"Um, well, what exactly do you mean by that?"

"I just mean, like, what do you do during your free time at home?"

"Seriously?!" Minami-san growled. "You are the scum of the earth! Do you normally ask girls you barely know about their leisure time?!"

"I'm not asking for any weird reasons! I'm just wondering what she does on a normal basis living with a guy—albeit a super herbivore—in the same house. Aren't you the least bit curious?"

"I guess. I asked Irido-kun about this before."

"Yeah, I've heard the guy's perspective too, so now I wanna hear the girl's side. After all, I'm sure there are more things that she's worried about, right?"

"I suppose that's true. This guy rarely goes outside in his free time."

(12:42) Me: Neither do you

"I do my best to keep my guard up everywhere around the house except my room. Surprisingly, I think we've been living peacefully, without incident."

(12:42) Yume: Still more than you

How is she holding a conversation while typing?

Kawanami let out a sound of admiration. "I guess real life is different. In manga and stuff, people are always running into each other in the bathroom."

"No duh. Real life and manga are completely different, idiot."

"Who are you calling an idiot, you idiot! Hey, Irido, ignore what she said. I bet there have been some manga-like happenings where you run into each other, right?"

"Nope. We've ironed out the bathroom stuff already so nothing awkward happens."

(12:43) Yume: Except that time you stole my bra

(12:43) Me: I told you, I just picked it off the floor!

(12:43) Yume: Sure you did

This girl just really loved to drag up the past. I thought we were past this. Just as I was about to criticize her for her dark, clingy personality, I got a follow-up message.

(12:44) Yume: After all, you're a liar

Me? A liar? There she went again with the baseless accusations. *When did I ever lie to you?* I shifted my gaze diagonally to Yume, who immediately turned her head to look out the window. I guess that meant that she'd been looking at me until just then.

I had never once lied to her, including when we were in middle school. I don't think there had ever been a situation in which I'd needed to. Even if I forgot a promise, I wouldn't make up an excuse as to why. I'm not proud, but I'm not the kind of guy who forgets even the smallest problem. For instance— And just as that thought entered my mind, I felt a sudden shock across my body.

“Ah!”

Kawanami and Minami-san looked at me with surprise on their faces due to my sudden outburst.

“What? Is there something wrong?”

“Did you forget a textbook for one of our afternoon classes?”

“N-No, sorry. It's nothing, just my misunderstanding.”

I tried to dodge their questions while certain information was regurgitated in the back of my head. *O-Oh! I know what Ayai was trying to say back then...* I looked at Yume who had started talking again as if nothing had happened. Her expression was rigid.

Agh, okay, fine. Dammit, I don't have a choice. It's my loss. As of today, I relinquished my claim to being a guy who knows the psyche of poor communicators.

It was now our weekly homeroom, meaning that it was time for us to change seats.

“Okay, Irido—the guy one—come up to draw your lot.”

Apparently, this analog method by which seats are chosen does not change from middle school to high school. Just as we had in middle school, we needed to pick out a number that was handwritten onto a piece of paper one by one.

I stood up and pulled out my chair, walked up to the lectern, and picked a folded piece of paper. I didn't open it though, because there was a rule that we couldn't open them until everyone had drawn a lot.

“Other Irido, you're up. Keep it going.”

“Yes, sir.”

Our teacher had Yume get up without even waiting for me to get back to my seat. We, the two Iridos, passed each other—the one who'd already drawn his seat and the one who had yet to. As we passed each other, I stuck out my hand and lightly brushed against Yume's pinky with my own.

Yume's reaction was a face filled with surprise and a sound to match it as she stopped in her tracks and turned to look at me. I just gave her a deadpan glance as I returned to my seat.

"Irido? What's the matter?"

"N-Nothing. My apologies, I'm fine."

Yume walked up to the lectern, picked one of the lots scattered across it, and returned to her desk, passing by the next person in line. Just as she passed by my desk, she shot me a quick glance. It didn't take her telling me directly through LINE or a handwritten note for me to understand that she wanted to know why I did that.

I didn't have any real reason. I just wanted to stay a person who kept his promises. The truth behind all of this stemmed from something really trivial. Back when we were in middle school, in that one month when our seats had actually been next to each other, there'd been a certain conversation we'd had while exchanging notes.

I can't remember the exact words that we used, but I'm pretty sure that Ayai started off the chain by writing something like, "I hope we get to sit next to each other next month too."

I already had calculated the likelihood of that happening, so I responded by saying, "It'd be a miracle."

I couldn't just flat-out say that there was pretty much no way that we were ever sitting next to each other again, so I tried to soften the blow. Of course, miracles are called miracles because they don't really occur, but apparently that was different in Ayai's world.

"Then let's use some magic to make a miracle," she wrote back.

The magic in question was apparently a specific charm that helped you sit next to the person you liked. I wasn't much of a believer, especially as a middle schooler, and mentally wrote it off as some stupid thing for babies, but Ayai was really into it. For a girl who loved novels in which people were decapitated or cut up into pieces, I was surprised that she liked something so girly.

Regrettably, back then, I thought that this side of Ayai that I was seeing for the first time was cute, so as her boyfriend, it was my duty to play along. The only problem was that there was no charm that worked for couples who wanted to sit next to each other, so we had no choice but to try and come up with one ourselves, using what we'd done up until then as a reference.

What we came up with was touching our pinkies together without anyone noticing while we passed each other drawing lots. We'd

already been playing a stupid little game where we'd touch each other's fingers without anyone seeing while picking up the other's dropped eraser, so this was like an extension of that.

But...wouldn't you know it? I'd completely forgotten what we'd discussed when we went to draw lots. *Please* allow me to make an excuse for that.

We were, of course, avoiding anyone else seeing the notes we wrote to each other since that would immediately out us as a couple. That's why we would always quickly destroy the evidence like we were some kind of spies. The notes we'd exchanged regarding the charm were, of course, no exception.

Humans are able to change short-term memories into long-term memories through repetition. Had I really been expected to remember the intimate details of idle chats (or at least in my mind that's what they were) we had in class—an environment where our attention was already spread thin? No way!

In the end, all I really can do is make excuses, but I was clearly the one in the wrong. Now I can fully understand what Ayai had felt back then. I'd shown no signs of participating in the charm that we'd decided on, and then when she'd tried to speak up, she could see from the look on my face that I had completely forgotten.

I could almost guarantee that she was thinking something like, "Oh, I guess I was the only one taking this seriously. Oh wow, I'm so cringe. Doing something so childish like a charm when I'm in middle school? I'm glad he forgot. Let's just pretend this never happened. This way neither of us gets hurt! Aha ha ha..."

There was no way that she hadn't been doing her best to convince herself about the reality of the situation while holding back tears. Yume Ayai had been a completely different person from who she was now.

Even if this had happened over a year ago—even if this wasn't someone I liked in the same way anymore—my pride wouldn't allow me to leave it like this.

That's why I now had the perfect opportunity to fulfill my promise from all the way back then. Her eyes were burning holes into my back. I wouldn't have been surprised if she had started stabbing me with her mechanical pencil. But I figured this would be the last day I had to endure those eyes on my back. After all, charms are just for babies.



I'm sure the punch line of this story is already obvious.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

The two of us stared at each other without any emotion. Our seats were once again in front of and behind one another's.

"Wow, you Irido siblings... How'd this happen? What a miracle!"

"Ha ha, so these things really do happen..."

Kawanami and Minami-san had come over to our seats, all too eager to show their surprise. While Yume and I had once sat next to each other in the front near the window, our new seating arrangement had us in the back towards the middle.

Yep, the results of the seat change were Yume and I once again sitting in a line, one after another.

"Zero point thirty-three percent..." Yume mumbled, her gaze fixed on my desk.

Oh yeah, I know that number. Good grief. I took out my phone and began quickly typing away.

(14:56) Me: It's not that low of a probability since the order for the first time we change seats is determined by our seating number.

Yume looked down at her phone, then glared back at me after reading my message.

(14:57) Yume: Ew, you're seriously calculating the probability? Creep.

Hah. That won't work on me. Being called a creep by a creep doesn't hurt at all.

Due to the interference of some kind of stupid higher power out there, I was once again unable to get away from this girl... That being said, my goal had been accomplished.

Though our seats may have been in a line, the order in which we were sitting had changed. She was now in front of me instead of the other way around. This meant a complete situation reversal. With her back turned to me, I was in complete control! *Now then, I have a month. How shall I pay you back for all the abuse you've made me endure?*

I snickered out loud.

"Wh-Why are you laughing like that? What are you planning?!"

"Why don't you ask yourself that?"

Even if I hadn't been granted release from our seating arrangement, I had a chance for revenge. Was this thanks to the charm? No way, right? There was no way that charm we came up with would still work now. It wouldn't make sense.

After all, that charm had been for people who were *already* in a

relationship.

The Ex-Couple Lean Against Each Other

“After all, I *am* your older sister right now...”

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-called boyfriend during eighth and ninth grade.

It had all started in the school library with a book I was too short to reach, and a cliché that, during my struggle, none other than *that* guy was there to reach out and grab it for me. After that, we hit it off due to our mutual interest in books.

That being said, the genres we preferred were slightly different. I was a die-hard fan of mystery novels, but in contrast, he just read whatever he felt like. For the most part, creatures known as middle schoolers look down on anyone who doesn't think as highly as they do of certain things. In other words, they're prejudiced—which is exactly how I saw his unprincipled reading habits.

The reason I, a person whose heart was darker than any work of Seishi Yokomizo's, was compelled to write an anachronistic love letter to him was because, as much as I hate to admit it, there was something other than books that we had in common. What was it? Well, it was something partially responsible for why I was in this joke of a situation: we both had a single parent.

I don't remember mom and dad getting into a big argument or anything. Up until maybe the end of seventh grade, I was living in an average, peaceful household. They never fought, and, of course, there was no violence whatsoever. So naturally, it came as a huge surprise when my parents suddenly separated.

I've never asked for the details, but I think I know now that there wasn't any kind of huge reason behind it. Their separation came from lots of small chips and cracks in their relationship that were only exacerbated by the waves of time. The flames of passion between them weakened and fizzled until they were gone altogether. At the end of it all, they just couldn't be together anymore. Given my own experience, I wouldn't be surprised if this were the case. After all, that kind of situation isn't exactly uncommon—even I've gone through it.

This, however, was not something that my younger self understood. I was so lonely that I cried every day. My mom hugged

me tightly and apologized over and over again. Seeing her like that broke my heart, and at a certain point, I'd decided to not cry anymore so that she wouldn't have to keep saying sorry.

But because all of that had happened when I was so young, it left a gaping hole in my heart. The family that was supposed to be there—that I'd just assumed would be there, intact, forever—had disappeared, leaving a void in its place.

I still see him once a year, so it's not like I've completely lost contact with him... But when I do, mom is never there. Mom and dad are still both my family, they're just not part of the *same* family. One day they were, and then the next, *poof*, they weren't. I wouldn't call it a stroke of bad luck or misfortune, necessarily. But that's how this hole inside me came to be.

Maybe that's why I'd felt like I *had* to ask that guy whether he was lonely. My voice had been filled with hesitation and caution, as if even the tiniest inflection would bring everything crashing down on top of us.

"Lonely? I don't know what you mean by that."

Looking back on this makes me realize just how cringey and childish that answer was, but what was even more salient was his expression—there wasn't a single trace of him joking around. Not one. The word "lonely" wasn't even on his radar.

I could only slightly see his expression from the side, but it blew straight through the hole in my heart. He didn't feel like he was missing anything—he didn't have a hole in his heart like I did. He didn't cry out of loneliness because he wasn't lonely to begin with. That's why he didn't need to be held and comforted like me.

The isolation and loneliness of it all blew through me, leaving only a slight tinge of pain in its path. Just like how medicine stings when you apply it, his words stung my heart.

I never asked about his mom. I didn't know why he'd grown up to be such a cynic. One time, however, after we'd moved into this house, I went into a room that none of us ever go into. It was a Japanese-style room with tatami mat flooring. At the end of the room, I noticed a Buddhist altar—a shrine to the deceased.



The second Sunday of May has a meaning to it that is apparently unknown to most high school boys of the world. To me, it was one of the most important days of the year. In the past, the most important day to me had been August twenty-seventh, the day that I had become Irido-kun's girlfriend. That's nice and done with now, so Mother's Day might have taken the top spot.

"You," I called out to him in a cold voice.

It was the first Saturday after Golden Week had ended. I'd finished studying for the day, so I decided to go downstairs. Right before my eyes was my little stepbrother lounging on the living room couch, a book in hand, without a care in the world.

Without even so much as glancing at me, he continued reading and replied in an annoyed tone. "What'd you mess up this time?"

"Can you not just assume that I messed something up?!" *Besides, you've had your fair share of mess-ups too!* I composed myself before continuing. "A-Anyway, you're not empty-handed, right? Tomorrow's the day."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"A present! For Mother's Day!"

Mizuto blinked at me in confusion and said, "Huh?" He then shut his book, picked up his smartphone, and brought it to his mouth.

"Okay Google. Mother's Day."

"Why are you googling it?!"

"Oh, so it's a holiday on the second Sunday of May...and it's a way to show appreciation for all the hard work that mothers have done. This rings a bell."

"Are you serious right now?"

"Can you blame me? I've been without a mom for a while."

"Then do you know when Father's Day is?"

"Okay Google. Father's Day."

"Why are you googling it?!"

I knew he didn't care about other people, but I hadn't realized it extended to his family members too. What kind of miracle allowed him to actually get a girlfriend? *Hey, middle school self, are you hearing this?!*

Mizuto averted his gaze and said, "I'm pretty sure it's normal for guys not to do anything. Yeah, let's just go with that."

"Nope." Just as he tried to pick up his book and start reading again, I quickly snatched it away.

"As long as I draw breath, I will not allow you to forget Mother's Day."

"It's kinda weird that you're suddenly the Mother's Day police. Is this in addition to your role as one of the Van Dine's *Twenty Rules* police?"

"Don't bring that up!" *The cringey girl who lambasted any mystery novel that went against Van Dine's Twenty Rules is dead.* "Anyway, it's safe to assume that you haven't gotten anything for Mother's Day, right?"

"I don't know anything about presents."

"Really? Seemed like you knew enough to push a Christmas present onto your girlfriend in the middle of the night."

“Don’t bring that up...” He glared at me while I sneered at him.

We both had certain aspects of our lives that we wanted to leave buried. Mizuto let out a sigh and, at long last, sat up. As he did, he almost hit me in the head since I was looking down at him.

“Get to the point already. What do you want me to do?”

“If I just leave you to your own devices, you probably won’t go out to buy a gift no matter how much time passes. So we’re going to go buy a gift. Now.”

“Huh?” He looked at me like I was an alien.

How rude.

“You want *me* to go with *you*? *Together*?”

“That’s right. I can watch over you, our parents will think we’re getting along, it won’t be embarrassing if both our names are on it, aaand this’ll also cut the cost of the present in half.”

“That last bit is what you’re really after, isn’t it?”

“It’s the thought that counts, not the cost.” Truth be told, my finances *were* in a little bit of a dire state from all the times that I’d hung out with friends.

Mizuto let out another sigh. It’s said that every time you sigh, happiness leaves your body. If that were true, then he’d have died in some kind of traffic accident by now.

“Forget it,” he declared. “You want me to go shopping? With you?! Ha! Have you already gone senile? You good? Do you remember if you ate today?”

“You are *really* getting on my nerves!” He was a genius when it came to pissing me off. *Fine. If you want to act like that, I have a hand to play.*

I went back to my room to quickly change clothes. I gave myself a once-over, and once I confirmed my outfit was perfect, I went back downstairs, returned to the living room, and peeked down at him while brushing his hair to the side.

“Hello, Mizuto-kun.”

“Huh? We *just* saw each—” He didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence. No sooner did he lay eyes on me than he blinked, dumbfounded.

I was wearing a dress with a cardigan, complete with a wide brim hat. It was the kind of outfit that a rich girl would wear in the summer. Why these clothes? Well, this was the exact look he was into.

I let out a slight grunt as I thrust my hand against his chest. He was staring at me in a daze; his heart was beating a lot faster than usual.

“Oh? Oh, dear, what’s this? How strange. Tell me, my little stepbrother, why is your heart racing at the sight of your stepsister who’s only dolled herself up a little? This is certainly against the rules,

wouldn't you agree?"

"Wha— Are you trying to say that heartbeats count now?!"

"We never made any amendments that said involuntary spasms *don't* count."

Whoever acted in a way that was unbecoming of a sibling had to obey the order of the other. Those were the rules, and there were no siblings out there whose heartbeat quickened from something as trivial as their sibling in a dress. My lips curled into a triumphant smile.

"Heart rate aside," I continued, "there's still the matter of how utterly *smitten* you look. You really like this kind of pure outfit. Otakus really do have too many fantasies about girls."

"Fantasies"? You're kidding, right? I haven't fantasized a single time after a certain someone completely destroyed every last one of my dreams."

"I haven't the faintest who you're talking about. The only person here is your dear older sister."

"Dammit..." Mizuto cursed under his breath and sat up, doing his best not to look at me. "Fine, I'll go with you to buy a present. That's good enough, right?"

Oh, he's being surprisingly obedient. I thought he'd put up more of a fight.

"Just *that* good for you, huh?" I said, shooting him a teasing smile. In response, he just muttered, "Shut up."

"Hold on, you're not *really* going out dressed like that, are you?!"

"What? Why not? Sweats aren't good enough?"

"Of course not!!!"

I made him change and fix his bedhead. After that, we were finally ready to leave. I thought he'd come back dressed in clothes that were a similar style to the ones that he'd worn when we went to the aquarium, but he ended up wearing a normal shirt, a normal vest, and normal pants, which made for a very normal outfit.

It wouldn't have been great, I supposed, if he'd put *too* much effort into his outfit because then people might have thought we were on a date. I wasn't disappointed, I swear.

I looked up at the sky past the brim of my hat. It'd started to get fairly hot recently. Heat in Kyoto meant a *sticky* heat, so all things considered, maybe wearing my dress had been a good choice since it had good airflow.

"All right, let's go."

"Yeah..." he said, turning away from me and immediately walking away.

It seemed that his plan was to not look at me whatsoever. I

couldn't help but snicker as I sped up to match his pace.

The last time we'd gone out together, I'd been thrown off by how much effort he'd put into his appearance, but this time, the deck was stacked against him. This put me in *such* a good mood.

"So where are we going? Kawahara-machi? Kyoto Station? Either way, we usually ride our bikes there, so..."

"You think I'm going to ride a bike in a dress? Are you stupid?"

"Yeah, I know. Can't you tell from context that I'm asking you what *you* want to do?"

"Obviously, we're taking the train. Are you stupid?"

"Wow what an innovative way to end your sentences. Can I hit you?"

I was a little worried he might actually carry out his threat, so I decided to keep a slight distance from him as we walked to the stop that would get us to Kyoto Station—the place with the gift shop that I went to every year for Mother's Day.

Train fare was a little over two hundred yen, but the train ride wouldn't even take ten minutes. I waited for Mizuto to buy a ticket and then scanned my train pass and moved through the turnstiles.

"Why don't you have a pass?" I asked.

"It's a waste if you put money on it but never use any of it."

So because he didn't have anyone to hang out with, he never got a chance to actually use any of the money on the card, huh? How sad.

The platform was filled with people. Trying to advance even a little required needlelike precision. Mizuto groaned next to me at the sight of this maze of people.

"It's packed..."

"You may not know this since you stay holed up at home all the time, but most people actually go out on the weekends."

"I hole up at home *because* I know that," Mizuto said in a worn-out voice.

As always, he hates crowds... But then again, who likes them?

I grabbed the elbow of my now completely dejected little stepbrother and pulled him along while saying, "Come on, stay close so we don't get separated."

"I'm going home if we do."

I dragged Mizuto across the platform to line up for the train. It was like I was actually taking care of a little brother. If this was how it was going to be, I'd have preferred if he were smaller, cuter, and more obedient.

The train came after some time, and I heard Mizuto make a sound of disapproval from next to me. "We're getting on *this* one? Do you wanna take the next one instead?"

"It's gonna be the same no matter how long we wait."

The train was filled with people grabbing onto the hanging straps. After we got on, it'd be completely full. That being said, a full train in Kyoto was probably better than a full train in Tokyo, since the train wasn't so full that you were squished against other people. In Kyoto, you just couldn't take a single step without crashing into someone. Much better. But the look on Mizuto's face made it seem as if he was in the pits of despair. I was certain that he'd die if he ever rode the train in Tokyo.

We waited for people to get off and then got in line to board. Since we were last in line, the doors shut behind us after we boarded. The train slowly accelerated, making me slightly lose my balance. Right when that happened, he called out to me.

"Hey..."

I let out a stupid noise as he pulled my arm from behind and pushed my back against the door.

What's your problem?! Just as I raised my head to give him a piece of my mind, I let out a small gasp. Mizuto was in close proximity, looking down at me, and had switched places with me, his arms pressed against the doors to support his body.

He had a thin neck for a guy, but a distinct Adam's apple, which was currently right in front of my eyes. Every breath he took felt like he was whispering into my ears. Even more surprising was that despite how dead his eyes had just been, he was now glaring right into my eyes. Objectively speaking, he'd just slammed me against a wall.

"Shouldn't you be the one closest to the door?" he asked shortly.

From these words, I was able to figure out what he was thinking. *Is he worried about groping? Really?* The edges of my lips bent upwards, and I returned his look.

"Wow, you're protecting me?"

"Well, yeah." Then, in retaliation, he sarcastically said, "Isn't it normal for a little brother to protect his older sister?"

That's right. He's my little brother right now.

"Don't you think you're being too cheeky for a little brother?" I frowned.

"Cheeky little brothers exist, you— Whoa!"

"Hyah!"

The train went around a curve, rocking everything to the side, which made Mizuto lose his balance and fall onto me. Before I knew it, my face was burrowed into his shoulder, pushing me completely against the door.

"S-Sorry." His low voice tickled my right ear.

Though I'd grown since middle school, I was still shorter than him. He was taller than me to the point that his lips reached my forehead, so as he was falling onto me, he could probably feel just

how slender and delicate I was or—

“Anyway, I’ll get off of you now.”

“Ah, w-wait. Stop!”

Just as Mizuto tried to back away, I grabbed his shirt in a panic. It wasn’t because I *wanted* to stay like this any longer. It was just, if he broke away now, he’d have a full view of my face...and I would have to be the little sister.

“Y-You’re just gonna fall when the train rocks again anyway since you’ve got sticks for legs.” I wasn’t going to tell him the real reason, so I just squeezed out a believable excuse on the spot. “S-So just stay in a position that’s comfortable for you. Our stop is next anyway.”

“Okay...” His breath from when he spoke caressed my ears, and after that we both went silent.

Incidentally, the train did not rock again after that.



After what seemed like an eternity, we arrived at the station and went straight to the underground mall using the stairs in the station. Following the wave of people, we walked past women's fashion stores, which meant that the gift shop that I usually went to wasn't too far away.

Whether it was due to the sea of people or the sparkly atmosphere that came from the women's fashion shops, Mizuto seemed to be very uncomfortable. *Good grief, this is why otakus are useless.*

"So, about this present..." Perhaps he was trying to pretend like he wasn't being affected by all of this, but he suddenly spoke. "What are you buying? You have something in mind, right?"

"Maybe something like a bouquet? A picture frame might not be too bad either. Or maybe a frying pan? She *does* like cooking."

"And yet you've never even tried to learn, huh?"

"Shut up. Just because I'm a girl doesn't mean I have to know how to cook. Get with the times."

"Ha. I remember a certain girl giving me lunches without me even ask—Ow!"

He was kind of pissing me off, so I gave him a good kick in his calf. I reassured myself that one day I'd get my revenge and make something amazing. Soon enough, we reached the gift shop.

There was a florist across the street that I was saving as a backup in case I wanted to buy a small bouquet. For the time being though, I wanted to check my first choice. I pulled my little stepbrother along as he recoiled from the girly atmosphere, his eyes looking around at the various items on display.

"Hm, there are a lot of random things here, but there are also surprisingly a good amount of practical things too, huh?" He pointed to a notebook on the shelf. "Like this."

"Nobody gives random items as presents. Nobody except you, I guess."

"When have I ever given a random item to someone?"

"It wasn't something physical, but don't you remember recommending a random, incoherent movie to someone?"

"*Memento* is a masterpiece."

"Sure, but why did you recommend that to a middle school girl? It was so hard to follow the timeline."

Before we'd started dating, he'd recommended me—a middle school girl the same age as him—this movie about a guy who could only hold memories for about ten minutes, but was trying to find the person who'd murdered his wife. Sure, it was a masterpiece and right up my alley, but it was just one example of how cringey this guy had been back then.

“I don’t recommend things to people based on their age or status; I recommend things to the person themselves. You loved *The Butterfly Effect* and *Twelve Angry Men*, didn’t you?”

“I remember the movies, but somehow I don’t remember who recommended them to me.”

“Ugh. If you’re gonna act like this, maybe I should’ve just recommended some kinda bright and cheery rom-com to you. Watching you try and fail to keep a smile going would’ve been great.”

“If you’d done that, a whole lot of other things could’ve been avoided.”

I probably would’ve never confessed, and we’d be in a completely different situation right now. Wow, just like a real-life “butterfly effect.”

“So tell me, dear little stepbrother who recommends things to *people*, not just based on their age or status...have you decided on a gift for mom?” I asked while looking at mugs with letters on them.

“How should I know what Yuni-san likes? At the very least, I don’t think we should buy a gift like this. This is the sort of thing couples buy for each other then don’t know what to do with if things don’t work out.”

“True, we need to keep potential futures in mind when buying presents.”

If there was one thing I could praise our past selves for, it was the fact that we’d never bought any couples’ gifts. It would’ve been as annoying as having to deal with a shared social network account.

“Either way, I don’t really know what she likes,” Mizuto said while looking at the empty spaces on the display case. “But I guess I do have an idea for something that Yuni-san—well, I guess both our parents—could *use*.”

“Everyone? Mineaki-ojisan too?”

Mizuto nodded. “Let’s put the present on the back burner and walk around. I wanna think a bit.”

We took the escalator to the ground floor of the Kyoto station.

“Oh look, a bookstore.”

“Stop! We’re going to lose all our time and money if we go in there!”

As we walked along the row of souvenir stores, I had to keep pulling Mizuto away from the bookstore. He was like an ant attracted to a picnic.

“What are we even doing? It’s like we’re just aimlessly walking around.”

“That’s ’cuz we are.”

“Huh?! So I was just walking around with you buddy-buddy until

now?!”

“You sound happy. If you bark any more, people might mistake you for a dog.”

“If I’m the dog and you’re the master in this situation, I would’ve bitten your hand off by now!”

“Oh, I see. Guess I should be careful when I feed you then,” he said, taking sips out of the canned coffee in his hand before pointing it towards me.

You think I’m going to drink that?! You put your mouth on that! I pushed it away. Mizuto scoffed and then threw the empty can into a nearby recycling bin. *There wasn’t even any left!*

“It might seem like we’re aimlessly wandering around, but there is a reason. I’m looking for an idea,” Mizuto said as he weaved through the crowd.

“An idea?”

“I was thinking about something a little while ago. I’ve had this feeling that ever since they got married, our parents have been worried about us.”

“True... I feel like mom’s been coming home earlier than she did before the marriage.”

“Dad too. So it makes sense to assume that they have their concerns about a guy and girl our age living together, especially Yuni-san. Do you think she *wants* her precious daughter to be living in a house with a guy her age?”

“If I were her, I definitely wouldn’t.”

“Right?”

Truth be told, before we moved in, she’d asked *me* if it was okay that the person she was marrying had a son. Never in my wildest dreams had I thought that the son in question would be my age *and* my ex though.

To be honest, if the son had turned out to be older than a high schooler, I still would’ve had some grievances. I’d just broken up with this guy, so living with a man was not something I wanted to do in the slightest.

But if I’d voiced my opposition, mom would have either lived separately or just called off the wedding altogether. That’s why I held my tongue and decided that I’d wait to meet the guy before making any judgments.

When I saw that the guy I’d be living with was *him*, I decided to just suck it up because I knew that he posed absolutely no threat to me on either a physical and psychological level. Of course, mom knows nothing about any of this. I’m sure mom trusts Mineaki-ojisan, but she’s still worried about me.

“So I think we should take action to clear up any concerns that

they might have. This isn't something that can be accomplished in one day."

"Agreed. Stop coming to my room in the dead of night," I said, staring at him.

"Right back at you. But yeah, if we really need to get a hold of each other, we'll use our phones," he said, returning my stare with a dubious look. "What's the matter? You feeling okay?"

"Yeah... I'm fine."

Stealthily talking on the phone in the middle of the night? How's that different from when we were dating? If I said that out loud, there was no chance he wouldn't twist my words to make fun of me.

"Anyway," he continued without teasing me, "I think it's very unfortunate that they're so fixated on the two of us."

"Unfortunate?"

"They're married now, but they can't even enjoy it to its fullest. They should be able to celebrate a little bit at least."

"Oh, I see..."

Our parents were technically newlyweds, but instead, they'd been spending all their time on us. *I guess it is pretty rough.*

"So yeah," Mizuto said in a calm voice, sticking his hands in his pocket while continuing to walk. "The best present we could give the two of them is time—time for them to spend as a husband and wife...or at least that's what I think."

From what I could glean looking at his profile, there wasn't a trace of him making a joke or putting on airs. He very naturally said exactly what he thought with complete honesty.

I never expected that he was the kind of guy who could say things like this. This is the guy who doesn't know what loneliness is, and yet he can say this?

"Well, the problem is that I can't actually think of a good way to execute this. The fastest solution would be to give them some kind of flight tickets or a gift card for a restaurant, but dad has work, and there's no way we can buy anything like that with our allowances."

"So that's why we're wandering around?"

"Exactly. When you walk around an unfamiliar place and see things you don't usually see, you come up with things that you wouldn't otherwise."

What went on in this guy's head? What did he think about as he went through life? How could Mizuto, a person who didn't even know of the existence of Mother's Day until I told him, think of something this much deeper than me in such a short time?!

He could probably think like this because he actually tried to think things out for himself instead of asking other people. He didn't have anyone else to ask, so he had no choice but to use the resources

he had on hand.

The hole in my heart made a sound, then an answer peeled off of me like a scab.

“Why don’t you try thinking about it a different way?” Mizuto’s eyes flung to me as I spoke in a tone that sounded like I was about to give a soliloquy. “If we’re making time for them to be a married couple, then why do *they* need to go anywhere?”

Just as I said that, the outside of the station came into view. Through the slew of vehicles passing by, we saw a certain building, the name of it clearly displayed on its sign. It was almost as if someone had timed this perfectly, but it was a complete coincidence.

We’d never walked this way, and we’d never seen anything around here. We had done something out of the ordinary and ended up with an extraordinary outcome.

“Hm, I see...” Mizuto said, acquiescing before checking the time on his phone. “It might be too sudden if we do it today. How about next weekend?”

“Huh? W-W-Wait a minute! Y-You’re not serious, are you?!”

“This is *your* idea, isn’t it?”

“N-No! All I said was that you should try thinking in reverse!”

“Well, I’m all ears if you have any better ideas.”

“Uh...”

I had nothing. I tried and tried to come up with any other idea, but I couldn’t. There wasn’t anything I could think of that he would agree with.

But okay, I never expected that this guy would propose something like this! I looked up at the sign of the building. The second floor of the store had the words “Internet” and “Manga” displayed in large letters, and maybe it was just my imagination, but it gave off a shady feel. This was a place that people without money used—or at least from my knowledge, that was the case. It was an internet café.

“Happy Mother’s Day, mom! This is from me and Mizuto-kun.”

It was Sunday in the early afternoon, and we were all in the living room. I’d just given her the usual, yearly phrase and the gift we’d bought the day before. It was a modest bouquet that could fit in the palm of her hand, and as mom took it, she blinked and looked at Mizuto, who was standing next to me.

“Huh? This is from Mizuto-kun too?”

He looked away. *Really? He’s shy?* I jabbed my elbow into his ribs to silently tell him to shape up.

In the end, Mizuto didn’t look mom in the eye and just mumbled a response. “Well... You’re always making lunch for me and doing a lot of different things... This is just a way for me to show my thanks.

Yeah, that's pretty much it."

Could he not just say "thank you"? He had to go into the nitty-gritty of *why* he was thankful? But that seemed to be enough for mom, because large tears began to well up and fall down her face.

"Huh? U-Uh, Yuni-san?"

Mizuto seemed to be at a complete loss for what to do, but I had already had a feeling that this would happen. Even if she had a daughter as old as me, she was a big crybaby.

"N-No... Th-Thank youuuu!" she wailed through her sniffing and crying.

She wiped her face, which was now a mess from the tears, and then hugged Mizuto. He still seemed completely lost, but he at least had the sense to stay quiet and accept her hug.

Mom had never even asked Mizuto to call her "mom," and Mizuto, being the reclusive, distant person that he was, probably never really gave it too much thought, but I'm sure that mom wanted some kind of sign that Mizuto had accepted her. She was probably worried about that all this time since she'd already gotten divorced once. This was exactly why I'd wanted him to be included in the gift I gave her.

"Thank you too, Yumeee!!!" After hugging Mizuto for a bit, she immediately stood up and hugged me.

"Sorry mom, but don't get my clothes dirty."

"I knooooow!!!"

She rested her head on my shoulder so as to not get her flowing tears and snot on me. I had to bend my knees a little, since during my growth spurt I'd actually outgrown her. The first time she'd noticed I'd outgrown her, she'd pouted and said, "This isn't fair! You're my daughter!"

"Yume, Mizuto, you're both such good kiiids!!!"

"Thanks, mom," I said as I gently patted her back.

If anyone saw us right now, they'd probably wonder who was the daughter and who was the mom. Mizuto, however, just stared at the two of us, dispassionate as ever.

After she'd cried her eyes out on the two of us, she turned to Mineaki-ojisan, who was a little bit away, and jumped to him screaming, "Mineaki-saaan!!!"

He just kindly smiled and comforted her. *Yeah, I'm sure she'll be fine.* Just as I was thinking that, I saw Mizuto slip out of the living room.

I thought that was a little strange, so I followed him into the hallway, but he wasn't there. I looked around and saw that the door at the end of the hallway was ajar. As I tiptoed over, I heard the sound of a bell being gently struck.

The sound was light but long-lasting. It felt like past memories were being dragged back up. I'd made this same sound once before at the Buddhist altar in this very room.

I quietly peeked inside the open door and noticed the lights were off. Mizuto was politely seated atop the tatami mats. Facing the door was a compact Buddhist altar. I couldn't really make it out because of how dark it was, but it looked like there was a picture of a twenty-or-so-year-old woman on it. Her name was Kana Irido—Mizuto Irido's birthmother. This was her shrine.

Mizuto just sat there in silence with his hands together for about ten seconds before raising his head and staring at the picture for a while. Finally, he stood up and turned around.

Then, in a voice so void of anything it would make a desert envious, he asked me, "Peeking?" while narrowing his eyes.

But I ignored all that and walked into the room, sat down in front of the altar, took the small stick next to the bell, then tapped it lightly, making a light but long chime. I clapped my hands together and shut my eyes for a bit. When I raised my head, I saw that Mizuto had come back to sit next to me in complete silence, without a hint of emotion on his face.

We just stared at the altar for a while before I opened my mouth and asked in a low voice, "You don't remember, do you?"

"She had a weak body to begin with," he said, answering my vague question.

He didn't respond with a lot of detail, but I understood. He was most likely referring to the fact that childbirth exhausts a lot of energy, and she'd passed away before he could even really meet her.

"If I didn't have this picture, I wouldn't even know what she looked like. I don't know what she sounded like, what she liked, what she disliked—I don't know *anything* about her. Dad doesn't really talk about her either. All I've gotten is that my name, Mizuto, comes from her."

Mizuto and Kana, huh? Both had aquatic meanings: one was water, and the other, a river.

More than a month ago—the day we'd moved in—the first room that mom and I had gone to wasn't the living room or our rooms, it was this room right here. We had stood in front of this altar, put our hands together, and said our greetings.

Mom had deeply bowed her head and said, "I'm so sorry. I'll be in your care."

This woman still had a presence in this house, so that's why mom had apologized and asked for her permission by bowing her head. I remember Mizuto being there when she did that. He just stood there, emotionless as always.

His name had a part of his mom carved into it, which is why both of our parents agreed to put the altar here. Mizuto himself didn't have anything of hers. He didn't have memories or knowledge of her whatsoever. Even so, he was forced to deal with not having a mother...but just how exactly was he supposed to deal with that?! What was he supposed to think about that? Nothing! There was nothing that he could react with, so of course his face had no emotion on it.

"Hey..."

"Hm? Wh—" Mizuto let out a noise of surprise.

I leaned onto him, our shoulders lightly touching.

"What are you doing?" Mizuto asked, unfazed, in a grumpy tone right into my ear.

"I'm being nice. After all, I *am* your older sister right now."

"I thought that ended yesterday."

"There's no rule that these things end with the change of a day."

Couples break up. Even married couples don't always stay together forever. Family, however, is forever. That much was certain. So if he disappeared... If I disappeared... It'd leave a void in the both of us. We'd have lost something that wasn't there at first, but something that we should have had.

I don't think he'll be able to say that he doesn't understand what loneliness is anymore. Tick. Tock. The sound of a clock beginning to move rang out, and in that dim Japanese-style room, I leaned against my little stepbrother as if to carve my existence into him.

Finally, I was so close to him that he couldn't ignore me anymore and he let out a sound of defeat.

"Well, these are the rules, so there's nothing to do about it." I felt him slightly lean back into my shoulder.

"In for a penny, in for a pound, huh?"

"Are you calling me fat?"

"Heh heh," I giggled as we lay into each other, and I could have sworn that I saw Mizuto Irido smile ever so slightly.



Officially, we'd succeeded in giving our present for Mother's Day without incident, but the secret present had yet to be given.

"So, are we *really* doing this?" I pressed.

Our parents were apparently still flirting with each other in the living room, so we continued to hole up in the Japanese-style room. It goes without saying that we had separated from one another ages ago and were now seated at an appropriate distance.

"Of course we are. It would've been nice if we had a school trip or something right about now, but that's not happening for a while. Plus,

if we have to rely on school events, we won't be able to pull this off without waiting for one of them to come around again."

"Huh? How many times are you planning on doing this?!"

"Isn't it better to periodically create situations during which they don't have to hold back around us? If we want that, it's better if we're not home."

Right... That was the idea we'd come up with. We'd leave the house and sleep over somewhere so they could be alone. This way, the two of them could actually spend time as a married couple.

"Well, we just have to endure it for a bit. One day, they'll trust us enough, and then all they'll have to do is tell us to go out and grab food together or something."

"That's true, I suppose..."

"What are you being so wishy-washy about? You got a problem?"

"I have nothing *but* problems! I know I agreed, but we *are* a guy and a girl... Spending a night in a cramped internet café booth is just..."

"Huh?" Mizuto's face filled with confusion in the dim room.

"Don't tell me you thought we were gonna spend a night together at the internet café?"

"Wait... What?" My mind went blank.

Huh? Huh?! That wasn't the plan?!

"Are you an idiot?"

Huh?!

Mizuto let out a long and exasperated sigh before continuing.

"Minors aren't allowed to stay overnight in an internet café. If we tried that, we'd get the cops called on us at the front desk, then they'd call our parents too. We'd be shooting ourselves in the foot."

"I've never heard of that rule!"

"Hotels and aquariums are out too. You need parental approval to stay overnight. But there is *one* place that high schoolers can stay without any trouble..."

"Really? Where?"

"A love hotel."

Love...what? My body froze as Mizuto repeated himself.

"A love hotel. As long as they don't catch you being a high schooler on the security cameras, you're good to go... Apparently."

"Wha— Huh?!"

"You wanna go?"

"Hell no!!!" I slapped his shoulder, but he was unaffected.

"From what I saw when I looked things up though, there weren't any places that had a price that we could actually afford."

"Why did you actually do research?! You were thinking about staying at one with me if it was cheap enough?!"

“Yeah, in the worst-case scenario.”

“The worst-case...”

What does he mean the worst-case scenario?! I leered at him and scoffed. He pisses me off.

“So I’ve reserved a very normal place for us to stay the night.”

“Don’t beat around the bush. What is this ‘very normal place’?”

“Well,” he said, his expression unchanging, “put simply, with friends.”

Mizuto showed his phone to me, where a certain LINE conversation with our classmate, Kawanami-kun, was open.

Kawanami: Sure. I’ll let you stay over a night

Kawanami: I bet Minami will let Irido-san stay over if she asks!

Kawanami: She lives right next door, so I bet that’ll be a load off your mind!

“Huh?” I shot Mizuto a surprised look.

He just nodded with an unhappy look on his face and then said, “I was surprised too. I didn’t know those two were neighbors.”

The Ex-Couple Have a Sleepover

“You’re welcome.”

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-called girlfriend during eighth and ninth grade. At this point it’s like, “All right, what part of Mizuto’s embarrassing past is gonna come up now?” But hold on a second. There’s no need to brace yourself for that kind of story.

Sure, Yume Ayai and I had been impulsive, stupid kids when we’d dated, but we didn’t do *every* last thing that couples do. We were just middle schoolers—of course we couldn’t. The amount of freedom that one gets is proportional to their age, meaning that we essentially had none, severely limiting the things we could do. It goes without saying that spending the night with each other was something we could only dream about. I mean, we hadn’t even told our parents we were dating.

It’s not like I was scared of sleeping over or anything. *Seriously*. Technically, we spent the night together during the Outdoor Education trip we had in May of the eighth grade, but I wouldn’t count that since we were still just classmates—just two strangers in the same class who’d never had a real conversation.

Actually, given how isolated the two of us often were, we might as well have been aliens to our classmates. You’d think there would’ve been some kind of episode when these two aliens did something they wouldn’t want people to find out about, but no, nothing like that ever happened. Just passing by each other took everything they had, and any agonizing memories weren’t made until *after* they started dating.

So this time, I’d like nothing more than to skip over any stories regarding our embarrassing past and go right to the present where a bloody battle between the two of us was taking place, but there’s another memory we share that I need to talk about. How is it possible that two complete strangers who’d spent no quality time with each other somehow still ended up making memories together? The most interaction we’d had was when we’d pass by each other. Even so, I could still remember that one time—the time when I’d caught a glimpse of who Yume Ayai really was.

So let me tell you about our Outdoor Ed. I’d had no interest in it at all, which is probably why I don’t remember anything about what we actually did there. The only thing I remember with absolute

certainty is the title of the book I read during our free time—Hiroshi Mori's *Mathematical Goodbye*.

In my opinion, reading novels was the same kind of leisure activity as reading manga or playing video games, but apparently, most people wouldn't agree. Kids were praised for reading novels for some reason, so adults wouldn't get on their case for not participating in conversations. It's like some kind of bug in their programming.

Anyone who doesn't count reading and gaming as hobbies might think I was some kind of charity case. But that's just how I enjoyed my time in Outdoor Ed. Reading mysteries while in the mountains had a certain elegance to it, like maybe somewhere deep in the forest there might be some kind of strange-shaped mansion.

Our sleeping situation was nothing fancy. When night came, both the boys and the girls had their own sleeping bags laid out (with an appropriate amount of space between them) across a sort of banquet hall.

Whispers filled this dark space. Though whispers are meant to be quiet, when tens of people are whispering, it becomes very disruptive. All that was hard for me to sleep through, so I got up, grabbed my book, said that I was going to the bathroom, and left the sleeping-bag-filled banquet hall. As I left, I felt the gaze of the guys around me who might as well have been asking, "Is this guy serious?"

The hall lights were off, but the moonlight that poured in from the window faintly lit up the wooden floor. There was just enough light to read. After walking a good enough distance away, I looked up to the sky.

As it so happened, the scene I'd been reading in *Mathematical Goodbye* had a lot to do with the starry sky, so maybe that's why I felt so compelled to look at the heavens even though it was unlike me to do so. *Hm. The night sky looks pretty nice.*

My reaction was pretty typical of what people actually did when they looked up at the sky. The only people who'd just gawk at it in wonder were actors or YouTubers.

"Wow..."

No sooner had I had that thought than I heard a gasp of awe. *Oh, is someone watching a video?* I turned to the source of the sound and standing there at the next window down was a small-framed girl who was absentmindedly gazing at the night sky.

I wasn't the type of guy who remembered the names of my classmates, but there were some exceptions to this—namely, other misfits like me. If two loners became friends, it wouldn't change the fact that they were *still* loners. They'd be two loners hanging out together. Even so, it was hard to avoid a sense of camaraderie.

This was Yume Ayai—or at least, I was pretty sure that was her

name. She often sat at her desk reading books. I'd never seen her talk with friends, and even here, all I'd seen her do was wander around like a lost kid after failing to join up with a group.

Normal people probably won't understand, but there are *good* loners and *bad* loners. The good ones are resourceful and can get themselves out of trouble (e.g., forgetting their textbook) without asking anyone for help. The bad ones are hopeless and can't fight their way out of a wet paper bag.

Not to sing my own praises, but I was pretty resourceful, so I'd say that I was the good kind of loner. Meanwhile, Yume Ayai was obviously the complete opposite. I was a little uncomfortable around bad loners.

Maybe it was contempt for my own kind? Or maybe it was just secondhand embarrassment. Either way, when she found herself troubled, it made me feel troubled too, and I couldn't help but try to throw her a life raft.

When we'd been making curry at the camping area earlier in the day, I'd noticed that she couldn't get some of the ingredients she needed, so I'd given her whatever I hadn't used. She wasn't the kind of person who'd fess up to her mistakes, so all she could do was wait for someone to recognize that she needed help. Unfortunately, the only person in our class who could put themselves in the shoes of a shy person like her was me, which meant I was the only one who could help.

That's why my image of Yume Ayai was the one I had from the classroom—ashamed of her weakness and thankful to me.

But right now, I was seeing a completely different side of her as she gazed at the starry sky. She had a trancelike expression on her face, like she was bathing in the moonlight. The look on her face was one I could never make.

I'd realized that, deep in my heart, I'd been looking down on her. Honestly, I was ashamed of myself. While my current self would say that it'd be okay to keep looking down on her forever, I couldn't help but praise my middle school self for his introspection, especially considering how thoughtless he usually was.

Maybe it wasn't good for me to stare at her while feeling that. But then Ayai looked at me. Her shoulders shrunk, and she made a sound of embarrassment before completely clamming up.

She really is hopeless. It was hard to think that a girl like her would have slipped out of the sleeping area for no reason, though. I figured she must've had some kind of business with me, but there was no chance I could just ask her that. It'd probably only freak her out more.

Thinking about it now, that might not have bothered her as much as I'd thought. My past self instead decided to direct his gaze out of

the window into the night sky and say, “The moon is beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Huh?!”

An instant reaction. If this were anyone else, they wouldn’t have interpreted the phrase in a literary sense, but even in this lack of light, I could tell that she’d gone red in the face and had become even more fidgety after recognizing the reference.

“S-So, u-uh... I-I—”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I said, my shoulders shaking slightly from laughter.

I don’t have a clue why I decided to tease her like that. Who knows what was going on in my head? Well, whatever. I choose to believe that I somehow knew even back then that she’d eventually transform into an insufferable person, so that’s why I did it.

For some reason, Ayai looked at me agape. I wondered what she was so surprised about, but in the end, she just said nothing and again looked up at the moon that I’d called beautiful. We stood there in our separate spots, staring up at the same moon that was surrounded by stars. Clouds passed it by slowly, and just as the biggest one covered it, I heard her soft voice. “Th-Thank you...for this afternoon.”

Before I could even turn, I heard her running back to the banquet hall. When I looked over, I saw her small figure disappear into the hallway. After this, I was positive that she’d followed me all this way just to say that.

I wouldn’t call that scenario our first meeting—no, I’d say it was just us passing by one another. There was no “cause” in the cause and effect. No spark or reason. If the conversation we’d had separated by one window space foreshadowed our relationship three and a half months later, then I think that whatever higher power is out there has been reading too many mysteries.

In the real world, not every little thing adds up to a certain event happening—it’s not that convenient. But at that time, I *did* make an out-of-character wish while staring at that starry sky that I didn’t think was particularly pretty. This wasn’t a wish I made with the thought of us as boy and girl, but as misfits who went to the same school.

I was sure that the memories she’d made during Outdoor Ed. weren’t great, so I wished that her memories under this starry sky would become something nice.

At some point, I said the words “you’re welcome,” but she was nowhere to be found. And that was okay. I could just tell her when I saw her again.

Before I realized it, two years had passed by.



In Japan, there's something called "The May Blues." It's a phenomenon where, after finishing the first month of school in April and acclimating to everything, you become lethargic and unmotivated with the warm weather. I'm envious of anyone who can get used to their new student life in a single month. Even now, I'm *still* trying to get used to the fact that I'm living in the same house as my ex.

But in this second week of May, one week after Mother's Day weekend, I would finally be free of this stressful environment. "Joy" couldn't even begin to describe how I felt.

"You have my thanks, Kawanami. I'll have your back for midterms."

"Oh, you're gonna help me study?"

"I'm gonna cheer you on. You got this!"

"That's it?!" Kogure Kawanami, a guy whose appearance made it look like he was rebelling against our straitlaced prep school, shot me an exasperated glare while playing with his hair.

What a greedy guy. He should know how rare it is for me to cheer someone on.

This weekend, for certain reasons, I'd be staying over at Kogure Kawanami's house. My biological father and my stepmother were newlyweds and were both bending over backwards for their respective children. It didn't really seem like they had any time at all just to be a married couple.

So, with that in mind, their children—me and Yume, that is—had decided to give them a weekend where they could be alone as a present. That's why this Saturday and Sunday, Yume would stay with her friend, Minami Akatsuki, and I would stay with Kogure Kawanami. It'd be the first time in over a month that we would not be sleeping under the same roof.

"We're here: Chez Kawanami."

Kawanami had stopped in front of an apartment building that looked a little beaten up, and, as was typical for a building in Kyoto, wasn't very tall—only about ten floors. We walked through the auto-locking doors to the elevator to get to his apartment, which was on one of the higher floors.

The only thing was...a face I had no intention of seeing was just around the corner.

"Geh."

"Ah."

Waiting in front of the very same elevator were two high school girls. One of them was an energetic, small-framed girl with her hair tied into a ponytail. She was currently wearing a baggy T-shirt and a

cardigan that was tied around her shorts that unsparingly showed off her thin, bare legs—an outfit that really had a boyish feel to it. It was Minami Akatsuki.

Then there was the girl standing next to her who had irritatingly long black hair that looked like it came straight out of a horror flick. She was wearing a white dress that gave off the vibe of trying to be prim and proper. I wondered if it was part of her high school glow-up strategy of pretending to be a high-class girl despite being a low-class commoner like the rest of us. Anyway, the other girl was Yume Irido.

“Leave.” I shot her a hostile, malicious, unfriendly look.

In response, she gave me a spiteful, evil death stare. “Why don’t *you* leave?”

“You have other friends, don’t you?”

“Oh, my apologies. I should have taken into account that *you* only have one friend.”

Of course, none of this was said out loud. We had this back-and-forth through our mutual glares. We only stopped when we heard Minami-san’s cheerful voice, a stark contrast to the fruitless battle we were having.

“Oh hey, it’s Irido-kun! You’re having a sleepover too?” Minami-san said, standing in front of me and looking up at my face.

She’s gonna kill me! I instinctively took a step backwards.

“Y-Yeah, you could say that.”

“Wow, what a coincidence! Yume-chan’s sleeping over at my place today!” Minami-san took another step forward, closing the distance between us, and then said in a low voice, “This sleepover was *your* idea, wasn’t it?” Her mouth was curved into a faint smile that was unbecoming of the cute little critter that she was. “Thanks. Being able to have a sleepover with Yume-chan—just the two of us—is like a dream come true! *Just* the two of us!”

I had no clue what she was up to, but this *was* the crazy chick who had proposed to me just so that she could become Yume’s stepsister. I figured it’d be a good idea to give her a quick reminder.

“Keep things PG, Minami-san.”

“You jelly? Yay! It was worth being so pushy.”

“You serious right now? It’s amazing how you come up with these grand delusions one after another so easily.”

“Thanks!”

That was not a compliment. Stop looking so proud.



“All right you two, break it up.” Kawanami picked up Minami-san by her collar as if she were a cat and dragged her away from me. “Stay out of our man’s sanctuary and go pick some flowers or something.”

“Wow. I’ve never seen such transparent sexism. Also, ‘man’? Heh, that’s the *last* word I’d use here.”

“Oh what, are you okay leaving your princess over there all by her lonesome?”

I looked over at Yume as Minami-san and Kawanami bickered. She was grimacing in our direction. As soon as she noticed me, she turned away and pouted.

Minami-san freed herself from Kawanami’s grip before dashing over into Yume’s arms.

“Sorry, Yume-chan! *I* won’t let you feel left out!”

“No, it’s quite all right, Akatsuki-san. I apologize for the crass ogling you were subjected to by my little brother. I’m ashamed to be related to him.” She shot a cold look at me.

“*Crass*”? *Does she need to get her eyes checked?*

Minami-san then turned to Kawanami while holding Yume’s arm and said, “Okay, well, don’t bother us, Kawanami. *This* is a *woman’s* sanctuary.”

“I wouldn’t try to come near your place even if you asked me to,” Kawanami said, picking at his ear, giving an uninterested response.

In contrast, Minami-san stuck out her tongue tauntingly.

“Say, Akatsuki-san, I’ve been wondering...” Yume said. “What is your relationship with Kawanami-kun, exactly?”

Ah, yes. This was one thing that I’d failed to account for.

The plan had been for both of us to leave the house to give our parents alone time as a present, freeing myself from Yume in the process.

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that,” Minami-san said with a bright, innocent smile. “We just live next door to each other and used to play a lot together when we were kids.”

“So, you and Minami-san are childhood friends,” I said, poking fun at Kawanami as we sat in his living room.

There was no trace of his parents since, according to him, they wouldn’t come home until the end of the day. Thanks to that, we were able to take up more space in the apartment, and I was able to enjoy my cup of barley tea at the coffee table while Kawanami sat on the other side.

“Nah, we’re nothing like that. We just live next to each other and used to play a lot together when we were kids.”

“What is *your* definition of a childhood friend then?! Apologize right now to all the childhood friend-types of the world!”

“What are you getting so riled up for?” Kawanami gulped down his barley tea.

What’s going on? Am I the weird one? Am I crazy?!

“Childhood friends, huh? I guess in the past, I would’ve said we were...”

“Why’re you saying it like you’re some kind of washed-up legend-making protagonist? Knock it off.”

“But y’know, to be childhood friends, you’d have to still be on good terms in present times, right? I wouldn’t call someone who merely attended the same elementary school as me a childhood friend.”

“The two of you look plenty friendly to me.”

“Well that’s just ‘cuz the two of us have high social skills—y’know, that thing where someone can get along with someone even if they don’t really like them.” He said this as if he were revealing some kind of great truth, which made me accept it without even a second thought.

If that’s what it meant to have social skills, I definitely didn’t have any.

“So you guys used to get along but drifted apart at some point? That’s kinda cliché, don’t you think?”

“Don’t call someone’s life cliché! Also, saying that we ‘drifted apart’ doesn’t exactly capture how far apart our hearts actually are.”

“And despite that, you guys live in close proximity.”

“Yep.”

“Sounds like hell.”

“Right?”

I understood this pain all too well. His circumstances were closer to mine than I’d thought.

“But wait, if I remember correctly, you said that the two of you went to the same cram school before, right?”

“Yeah, and I wasn’t lying. We went to the same cram school in middle school, *and* we’ve lived next to each other since elementary school.”

That’s a trick of misdirection! Don’t do that in regular conversations!

“I know you have your own circumstances, so I won’t pry too much.”

“Well, I will. How far have you gone with Irido-san?”

“Show *some* restraint!”

To this, Kawanami just snickered and said, “Calm down. You know, I *am* givin’ you a place to stay and a meal to boot. Can’t you indulge me just a little?”

“You’re just shamelessly taking advantage of the situation to pry into our private secrets, huh?”

“You could say that. I *am* interested in privates.”

“You’re just a pervert.”

“So anyway, have you seen her boobs? What color are her nipples?”

“Why would I tell you that?! I’m not even gonna tell you if I have or haven’t seen them!”

“Hm? So, what you’re saying is...the specifics of Irido-san’s boobs are for you and you only?”

“Whatever... Let’s leave it at that.”

“Hm, I see...” Kawanami said, grinning. Just as I started to get a bad feeling, he spoke up again. “Irido said, ‘Yume’s boobs are mine!!!’”

I heard a furious banging sound from behind me.

Wait... No way, right? I felt a chill wash over me, and I started sweating bullets. I looked at the guy sitting in front of me who was heartily laughing.

“Whoops, almost forgot! The walls in our apartment are paper-thin.”

Tell me that earlier! The wall behind me shook with each bang on it. This was beyond terrifying, but the sound kept going.

“Y-Yume-chan?!” Minami-san cried out. “Calm down! Between your hand and the wall, something’s gonna break!!!”

Then, from the other side of the wall, I heard a wailing sound like that of a mad beast, followed by a flurry of messages on LINE.

Yume: pervert

Yume: pervert

Yume: pervert

Yume: pervert

I guess she couldn’t be bothered to add punctuation marks or capitalize anything with how fast she was sending the messages. Spam emails could learn a thing or two from her.

I calmly switched my phone off then turned to the guy who was still in stitches and shot an ice-cold stare at him.

“Kawanami... Where’s your room?”

He was wheezing with laughter, but as soon as he heard my question he calmed down. His face froze with a smile still on it.

Mizuto Irido is not the kind of person who would cry himself to sleep. He’s the “eye for an eye” type of person. He doesn’t turn the other cheek; he punches you in *your* other cheek. That’s what he was

taught by the books he read growing up.

“When I grow up, I wanna be a policeman. I wanna be a strong policeman so I can protect Akatsuki-chan.”

“STOOOOOOOOOOOP!!!”

Then, yet another series of loud banging noises came from the wall.

“A-Akatsuki-san?! Stop! I heard the wall crack! It’s going to break!”

The composition notebook I’d dug up from the mountain of buried embarrassing history in Kawanami’s room was apparently from when he’d been smitten with Minami-san. There was no doubt in my mind that he’d wanted to marry her when he was little.

I was pretty sure this was the kind of homework that kids had to read out to the class, which meant that he’d shared this with other people. I hadn’t even been there and I could feel thirdhand cringe from that.

“Kawanami!!! I told you to throw that away!!! Yume-chan had to hear *all* of that!!!”

“How’s that my fault?!”

“It’s because you had to make some stupid joke, stupid!”

“Shut up, idiot!”

Kawanami, who was currently being restrained by a power cord, and Minami-san yelled at each other through the wall.

It was unexpected, but it was really something to see these two clash. Kawanami usually had a grin on his face like he knew something you didn’t, and Minami-san was just a complete psycho.

I smirked at Kawanami, who was rolling around on the floor while bound, and said, “Kawanami, I think you two are still on pretty good terms.”

“Weren’t you taught not to be a bully?!”

“It takes one to know one.”

Not bad, if I do say so myself. I really knew how to use one’s embarrassing history. It wasn’t hard after I’d dredged up so much of it myself. It’s not my choice to have this kind of power... (*Shiver.*)

“I wonder if there’s anything even more interesting in here?”

“You’re still going?! You’re a total sadist, Irido! How can you look so calm when your personality is so cruel?!”

I didn’t know this part of me existed either. Is this...truly me? (*Shiver.*)

I went back to Kawanami’s room, leaving him tied up and rolling around in the living room. His bed only had his pajamas that he’d thrown on them. His bookshelf only had manga. The cords for his game consoles were jumbled. I guess one could call this a normal room for a high school boy.

I saw his laptop on top of his desk and opened it up. Apparently, it was only asleep, so I didn't have to go through the lock screen to get to his desktop. *How careless of him, especially with a guest in the house.*

My new plan was to try and maybe reveal some of the possible dirty pictures he might have on the computer, but before I even had the chance, my eyes fell on something else.

"Oh, what's this?"

It was a Word document. Apparently, he'd been keeping a journal. I hadn't expected anything like it. I thought that maybe going through it would be a little too much of an invasion of his privacy, but...that concern only lasted a split second when I saw that it was last updated months ago.

My interest was piqued. *What, can't keep a steady schedule?* If he'd only kept a schedule for three days, then I figured he wasn't writing about anything too interesting. I double-clicked on the file to open it and was greeted by an entry written in regular font.

10/13: if anyone else but me is reading this, it means that I am no longer of this world.

"..."

I'd never seen anyone actually start a journal entry like that before. It was hard to believe that this was the same person who was energetically crying out and rolling around in the other room. Suddenly, I was too curious to stop and began reading other entries as well.

10/14: I had a nightmare. Akatsuki was bathing me. I won't lose.

10/15: My stomach hurts. I still have diarrhea. My stomach's been groaning forever.

10/16: I have a bald spot. I think I've been able to hide it with my hairstyle.

10/17: I coughed up blood for the first time in my life. I tried going to the hospital, but Akatsuki caught me.

10/18: I'm dying. So tired. Head hurts.

10/19: I can't do anything. She won't let me.

10/20: I can't. Save mmmmmmmmmmmmm

I closed the file and decided I'd forget what I'd just read. *I should be a little nicer to Kogure Kawanami.*

Night came before I knew it. It shouldn't have come as a surprise,

but Kawanami's parents still weren't home, so we decided to go out for dinner. According to Kawanami there was a family restaurant that he frequented nearby.

"We've got some frozen foods, and that's what I usually eat, but I can't really serve random stuff we have in the fridge to a guest," he'd said. "That wouldn't be right."

The town felt like a different world at night for some reason. It was the same scenery as always, but there was a different layer to it. Maybe I only felt this way because I wasn't really one to walk around outside at night that often.

As we walked through the lights from various shops' signs, I said, "Your parents really do come home late, huh?"

"This is Japan we're talking about. Working to the bone isn't abnormal here—it's just how it is in this exploitative culture." Kawanami shrugged while walking through the intersecting lights and shadows of the city. "I was impressed when you asked if you could stay over so that your parents could have alone time. I guess there are still some good-hearted young'uns out there after all."

"How old are you supposed to be?"

"I stopped counting after ten."

"How bad are you at counting?!"

Kawanami's shoulders shook with laughter. Living in an apartment where his parents were never really home was just the norm for him. Understanding that, it made me realize something—in a situation like that, it was only natural for him to want to befriend the person next door who was the same age. It was like having a sibling.

Minami-san and Kawanami are more like stepsiblings than Yume and I.

"Table for two?"

"Yes."

"A table for two *just* opened up. Please follow me."

It was a little late for dinner, but the place was alive with families inside. As the hostess guided us to our table by the window, I couldn't help but think how lucky we were to have been able to secure a table for two in the midst of all this.

When we reached it, the sound of four people simultaneously saying "ah" at the same time rang out.

The table we'd been taken to was right next to the table that Yume and Minami-san were sitting at.

Minami-san made a face that made it obvious she was annoyed. "Ugh, I can't believe I forgot that Kawanami comes here too! Our romantic dinner for two is over..."

"What do you mean 'romantic'?" Kawanami scoffed. "This is a family restaurant. Let me guess, you're getting the Milan-style doria,

right?”

“What’s wrong with that?! It’s cheap *and* delicious! I bet you’re gonna get something unhealthy like pizza, right?!”

“What’s wrong with pizza? It’s cheap, delicious, *and* you can share it.”

Right as they met, they casually started bantering. I couldn’t help but voice my honest opinion: “You two act like you come here together all the time. Honestly, it really suits childhood friends like you guys.”

“Childhood friends?!” they cried at the same time.

“With him?!”

“With her?!”

“You two *have* to be doing this on purpose.”

Normally, people would only deny something in sync like that if they’d been accused of being in a relationship. Why’d they do it when I called them childhood friends?

I reluctantly sat in the chair against the wall next to Yume while Kawanami reluctantly took the seat on the outside of the table next to Minami-san. Sure, if we were so reluctant, we could’ve asked for a different table, but Kawanami probably would’ve read too much into it.

I had to be careful of close-range attacks from Yume. She had yet to say a single word but was restlessly fidgeting in her seat.

“There’s a bathroom by the drink bar,” I said.

“That’s not it! I-It’s just...the first time I’ve come to a family restaurant with my friends at night.”

“Ha. Good for you, Ms. High School Glow-Up.”

“I keep telling you, this isn’t a glow-up!”

“Yeah, that’s hard to believe when you’re fawning over your first family restaurant experience with friends.”

“What’s your problem? This is your first time too! You don’t have *any* friends.”

“I don’t consider going with Kawanami to a family restaurant as some kind of great achievement.”

“Hey, be nicer to the person who’s letting you stay at his place.”

After going through the menu, I ended up ordering some random cheap pasta and the drink bar. I’d heard of a drink bar, but had never gotten it before. For just two hundred yen, you had full access to the various fountain drinks available.

“Irido, go get our drinks.”

“Why should I have to do that? I’m not your gofer. Go get it yourself, lowlife.”

“That’s not what I meant. I’m gonna watch over our stuff while you get our drinks.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Right, so go with Irido-san.”

“Now you lost me.”

“This is your first time using the drink bar, right? She can teach you. It’ll be faster that way.” Kawanami was wearing a very mischievous smile while Minami muttered “gross,” giving him the side eye.

Using that logic, why don’t you come with me since you’re so experienced? But just as I was about to say that out loud, I was interrupted by someone’s voice ringing out.

“Oh? Interesting. You’ve never used the drink bar before? At *your* age? I see.”

“Hey, my dear little stepsister, do you mind explaining the look you’re giving me? It’s really pissing me off.”

“I’m just saying it’s unusual for a high schooler to not know how to use a drink bar. Have you never been to a family restaurant with your friends? Want me to teach you how to use it?”

Why is she getting all high and mighty over something as stupid as a drink bar?! I angrily stood up from my seat with determination.

“Just watch me. I’ll show you what a *real* drink bar is,” I declared.

“I look forward to seeing what you can do.”

“Did some kind of cooking battle start or something?” Minami-san tilted her head in confusion as Yume and I headed to the battlefield.

Cola, orange juice, seltzer water, black tea, iced coffee—there were a lot of different choices waiting for us, but it didn’t matter. My objective was the same regardless of which drink button I pushed. I put on my game face. I was about to finish this. *Bring it on.*

“I guess I’ll have an iced coffee...” I said, placing a cup in the indicated spot.

I was about to push the button when...

“Really? Are you sure about that?” Yume said with fascination while letting out a sigh and shrugging her shoulders. “Goodness, looks like you really *don’t* know, do you? This is why amateurs are just so hard to watch.”

“What? Are you trying to say there’s more to this than putting the cup in the spot and pushing the button?”

“Let me show you the ropes. You need to see what the proper etiquette is.”

Saying this, Yume took a cup in one of her hands and put it under the nozzle for melon soda. She filled the cup one-third of the way with a green liquid and then pressed the orange juice button, filling it another third of the way. Finally, she finished it off by filling up the remainder of the cup with seltzer water and mixing it all together.

The final product looked the same color as entrails and bubbled

like some kind of potion. I couldn't believe it had been made on Earth. It looked like something she'd scooped out of a river in hell.

"The drink bar is all about making your own original drink. *This* is how you're supposed to use it!"

"What..." I trembled in fear while looking at the drink that looked like some kind of failed potion that had been mixed in a video game.

Were high schoolers really drinking this stuff on a regular basis? Were they monsters that needed to eat industrial waste to grow?!

"Your turn. Mix as your fingers compel you to."

"Ugh..." I furrowed my brow and glared at the drinks.

I didn't like carbonated drinks, so if I took those out, then...

"I'll start with a little black tea."

"Okay."

"Then I'll put in a little grape juice."

"Huh?!"

"Then I'll finish it off with orange juice."

"Are you serious?!" She was doubting my sanity.

How rude.

"It's like Russian tea. You know all about Russian teas, right? It's black tea, but you put jam into it."

"Rude. I totally know what that is! And yes, I *suppose* it's kind of like that."

How could she doubt what I'd just done when that was exactly what she'd told me to do? We walked back to the table with our creations. Minami-san took one look at our concoctions and let out a laugh.

"S-S-Sorry, Yume-chan!" she said, trembling while clutching her stomach.

Yume tilted her head in confusion.

"Remember when I said that making your own drink blend was proper etiquette? That was a joke!"

"Huh?!"

"Ha ha ha ha ha! I didn't think you'd actually *believe* me! Aha ha ha ha!" Minami-san burrowed her face into the table in a fit of laughter, leaving Yume stunned and red with embarrassment.

Oh, so she fell for Minami-san's joke? I thought this so-called "etiquette" was strange. I can't believe she's so glib!

"Pfft, why did you fall for it too, Irido?!" Kawanami burst out laughing while pointing at my scuffed version of a Russian tea.

"Ha ha ha ha! I can't believe *both* of you fell for it! You two really are siblings! Aha ha ha ha ha!"

"Stop laughing, you childhood friends!" Yume and I said, completely in sync.

They must have really been enjoying this; tears were coming out

of their eyes. In the meantime, the two of us were bright red from humiliation while we tried to object to their claims. In the end, their laughter was so loud that the waitress had to come over and politely ask them to quiet down.

“Ugh, my stomach is churning,” Yume groaned.

We were now walking back to the apartment building after dinner.

“I still can’t believe you finished that drink from hell,” Minami-san said, snickering next to Yume.

“I didn’t have a choice. It’s not good to waste food or drink.”

“You’re such an honor student, but I love that about you!”

Minami-san did a gleeful hop and embraced Yume around her neck.

Surprisingly, Yume just calmly hugged Minami-san back while saying “Uh-huh,” dragging her along. *Guess she’s already gotten comfortable with this kind of physical intimacy.*

I continued to watch this girly display while clutching my stomach, which was currently undulating like a sea in the storm.

“Hey, want me to do that to you?” Kawanami asked from beside me.

“Do it, and I promise that I will paint your shirt the color of the chaotic abyss brewing inside me.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I think I get the point.”

In a move completely opposite from the two in front of us, Kawanami took a step *away* from me. *Very wise decision.*

“I know the two of you are rubes when it comes to that kinda stuff,” Kawanami said, referring to the incident from earlier, “but I didn’t think you’d be *that* bad.”

“Nobody bothers to write the exact procedure for operating a drink bar in novels.” To be honest, I’d been wondering what kind of candy a “drink bar” was until quite recently.

“Heh heh, this could be fun. I wonder what I’ll lie to you about next.”

“You’re definitely the type who’d commit a crime just for fun.” *And you’ll never fool me again.*

“Heya, Irido-kun!” I felt a weight on my left arm. Apparently, at some point, Minami-san had hopped off of Yume and latched on to me. “I heard from Yume-chan that you’re good at modern Japanese. This must be some kinda destiny! Midterms are comin’ up, and I could use a little help studying.”

What’s going on? Why is she all clingy over me instead of Yume?

Minami-san had somehow caught onto what I was thinking, because in the next moment, she was smiling and flashing a peace

sign.

“The night’s young. I’m in the middle of Operation Tease,” she whispered to me.

I looked at Yume, who was currently pouting while standing a little bit of a distance away from us. *Ah, I see now. So this is the power of a natural-born social monster like Minami-san. She knows exactly when to press on the gas and when to ease off. Very crafty.*

“Are you sure *you’re* the one making her jealous?” Kawanami whispered, in a tone that suggested he knew something we didn’t, to Minami-san from the other side of me.

She shot Kawanami a death glare, and he returned it with a loaded grin. *Could you two not have this battle when I’m literally in the middle of it?* As their whispering continued, I could tell that it just made Yume feel even more excluded. *Fine. I guess I have to do something...*

“Sorry to disappoint,” I said, shrugging, “but I doubt my study methods for modern Japanese will really help you.”

“Huh? Why?”

“I read a book a day, every day, for the entire year. That’s three hundred sixty-five books. Can you do that?”

“Oh god, nuh-uh. No way!”

“I don’t really have any kind of special study methods, so *she’d* probably be more useful in that regard,” I said, pointing at Yume, who was still standing at a distance from our little circle.

Being pointed to made her panic a little for some reason. “Huh? What? M-Me?”

“Yeah, *you*. You’re better at teaching people than I am. After all, you’re a hard worker.”

Yume’s eyes darted from side to side in her confusion before trying to play it off by twirling the ends of her hair. *Are you looking for something?*

“O-Oh. I’m surprised you’re so self-aware,” she said in an attempt to shake off her nervousness. “If you need help studying, Akatsuki-san, I’m the one to go to. I’m a much better teacher than *he* could ever be.”

“Yeah, your approach of studying like your life depends on it is much better suited for teaching, compared to someone like me who can get points on tests without even trying. I can figure things out just from reading the question.”

“What’s your damage? Are you gonna die if you don’t piss me off or something?”

I was simply stating the facts. Problem? I didn’t bother to verbally respond to her biting verbal abuse that grated my ears.

Meanwhile, Minami-san, still clinging onto my arm, said, “N-Not bad, Irido-kun... You used me to get points with her. You may be my

enemy, but I can't help but applaud." She was so close to me that I could see her cheek twitching.

I have no idea what you're praising me for. None of that was planned. I just got points without even trying.



(10:32) **Akatsuki**☆: noooo i wanted to see yume-chan naked so baaaad

(10:32) **Yume**: Don't blame me for your debauchery.

(10:32) **K_KOGURE**: Good decision-making, Irido-san! She has the body of a grade schooler, but the heart of a pervy old man.

(10:33) **Akatsuki**☆: u better sleep with one eye open, kawanami

A series of kitchen knife stickers followed her message, making Kawanami, who was lying on the bed looking at his phone, start shivering in fear.

After coming back, we'd taken separate baths. I was now sitting at the low table in Kawanami's room with my textbook and notes spread out across it.

I placed my phone next to me so that I could keep tabs on the LINE group chat that Minami-san had invited us to before we split up to go to our respective apartments. According to her nonsense reasoning, she wanted to liveblog her and Yume's lovey-dovey time together.

I kept glancing at the chat—mostly because I was concerned that Minami-san would do something crazy—but I was pleasantly surprised to see that Yume wasn't as defenseless as I thought.

(10:38) **Akatsuki**☆: irido-kun's not saying anything. whats he up to?

(10:38) **K_KOGURE**: Studying, even though he talked big about being able to get points without even trying.

(10:39) **Akatsuki**☆: ur not studying too? the two of us are

(10:39) **K_KOGURE**: Good joke.

(10:39) **Akatsuki**☆: i mean it

(10:40) **Yume**: Kawanami-kun, the test may be more than a week away, but don't forget how difficult the entrance exam was. Our school is different from normal high schools, so don't let your guard down.

Kawanami stared at his phone in silence before slowly sitting up and mechanically turning his head to me. "Will it...really be that bad?"

"It will," I responded immediately while turning a page in the textbook. "I might sing my own praises about being able to get points without trying, but if I don't go through the textbook before the test, I'm screwed."

"...Seriously?"

"Seriously."

I knew it'd be tough because I'd skimmed the textbook after getting it and received a painful reminder that we really were attending a prep school.

"Kawanami, you've got friends, right? Haven't you heard from anyone in a higher grade about how hard the tests are?"

"I kinda got the gist from rumors... Oh god, I still haven't gotten over that early-semester sense of freedom!"

I knew how he felt. We'd finally earned our freedom from the entrance exam studying hell, but we only had less than two months of reprieve before we had to force ourselves to return to that same hell.

"You might not have to try all that hard...if you're only looking for a passing grade, that is."

"Okay, then why are *you* studying your ass off right now?"

"Isn't that obvious?" I looked at the LINE chat. "There's someone I don't wanna lose to."

I might've lost on the entrance exam, but I wasn't about to continue eating her dust. I'd heard that the test results and rankings would be publicly posted in the hallways. This was my best chance to take the top spot and look down on her from the throne she had once sat on.

"You two are amazing," Kawanami said with surprise, making me glance up. "I could never go after someone head-on like that. I'd just pretend to take it seriously and then lightly play it off later when everything's over and done with. There's no way I could ever go all-out butting heads with someone like you two."

"Really?" I responded before even confirming what he was talking about. "I think you two are pretty overtly competitive, from what I've seen today."

"Nah. If you'd paid attention, you'd get that we're just *superficially* getting along with each other. We're not as out in the open as you two are with your competition. It takes way too much energy to keep that up."

"That's because you guys actually have tact." I knew that Kogure Kawanami might have had similar circumstances to mine, but the ability to communicate was definitely the one point where we

differed. "From my perspective, I'm jealous of how much tact you two have." If we were like them, I'm sure that our current circumstances and our relationship would be different.

"The grass is always greener," Kawanami said with a sarcastic but bright smile.

"Oh, look at you using an idiom. So you *did* get some modern Japanese studying done."

"I really made the best out of a bad situation," Kawanami said before jumping off the bed and rummaging through his bag for his textbook. "Guess I'll study for a bit. Come to think of it, it'd be nice to score higher than Minami."

"Right? I'm gonna cheer you on. You got this!"

"How about you *teach* me, since you're aiming for the top spot?"

Then, just like that, the night went by as we fulfilled our studious lives as students.

Kawanami had passed out on the floor even though it was only one in the morning. He was a lot less of a night person than I'd thought. I'd finished studying for the day, but since I was used to staying up late, I couldn't fall asleep just yet.

I wasn't really in the mood to keep listening to Kawanami sleep, so I exited to the dark living room, which was dimly lit by the faint moonlight that glowed through the balcony window. Looking outside, I could see the seemingly endless starry sky. It might not have been that amazing of a sight from an apartment building, but for someone who'd seen the same view from the same house his entire life, it was refreshing, especially from this height.

As if drawn to it, I walked out onto the balcony towards the night sky. The chilly yet soothing spring air blew across my neck as I did. It really was May.

I slipped on the sandals that were left out and walked to the railing of the balcony. On either side of the balcony were white partitions that read: "Break in case of emergency." On the other side of the partition to the left was Minami-san's room, which was also where Yume was presumably sleeping right now.

The panel wasn't too thick, so it probably wouldn't have been too hard to come and go as you pleased. Then again, I couldn't think of many reasons to break down this panel to get to the room next door.

I leaned onto the railing and blankly stared at the night sky. In front of me, there was a sea of lights that were eventually stopped by the shadow of a mountain. But beyond that, there was nothing but the vast expanse of the sky.

With the stars closer to me than ever before, I could truly appreciate how beautiful they were. This might have been the first

time that I'd taken a genuine look at the sky. Even when people fussed about a supermoon or a blood moon, the most I'd ever done was take a peek at it. If I had to say, the most time I'd ever spent sky watching was that one night in middle school during Outdoor Ed.

Suddenly I heard the sound of someone gasping in awe. I turned to my left, towards Minami-san's room, and my eyes were met with the girl standing on the other side of the partition.

As soon as she noticed me, she shyly looked away and shut her mouth.

"What? Are you embarrassed, getting caught going 'ooh' and 'ahh' while staring at the night sky despite being a high schooler?"

"Don't spell it out, just keep it to yourself!"

She turned as red as an oven that was heating up and hid her face against the railing of the balcony. As she did, I noticed the fluffy hood with bear ears she was wearing. It was so immature-looking, "childish" didn't even begin to describe it. Protruding from the hood was her hair, which was tied with white scrunchies into two long pigtails that hung down her chest. It looked like she'd just gotten out of the shower.

"Hm, I guess you were pretty embarrassed by someone seeing you wearing your cute animal pajamas despite being a high schooler."

"A follow-up attack?! You're so evil! You're an evil little stepbrother!!!" she wailed into the railing.

That's older stepbrother to you, dear little stepsister.

I gently smiled at her as if I were a monk trying to comfort her. "Well, don't let that bother you too much. I'm sure living in the same house with a guy your age has stressed you out a lot. This is a good opportunity for you to get some relief."

"Can you stop already?! There's nothing but venom in the words you're using to 'sympathize' with me. For your information, Akatsuki-san made me wear this!"

"Don't worry, I think you look cute (because you look like an idiot)."

"I can hear you, y'know?! If you think girls are happy just because you call them cute, you've got another thing coming!"

"I know. Why do you think I said that?"

"You're making this so much worse!"

Maybe it was because her mental state hadn't stabilized yet, but she hadn't thrown any insults back at me. She was just getting clobbered. It seemed as if I'd stumbled onto the bonus stage of this game. *I should collect all the coins I can while I have the chance.*



“You’re one to talk...”

Just as I began thinking about how I’d tease her next, Yume raised her beet-red face a little, shifted her eyes towards me, and asked, “What were you doing out here by yourself? Were you entranced by something? Or maybe you were having fun looking down on the night city, pretending like you’re some kind of mastermind? Are you some kind of edgy eighth grader?”

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t think about that, but unfortunately, this isn’t the top floor. Don’t underestimate how anal edgelords are about their settings.”

I wondered if mentioning the eighth grade reminded her of that night when she had been the one entranced by the night sky. She looked at me for a bit, dubiously, before making a sound as if she’d realized something.

She looked up at the night sky, and her lips curled into a smile. “The moon is beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Geh.” My face twitched. She was too perceptive for her own good.

“Oh wow, you still remember that?” She shifted her gaze from the sky to me while wearing a teasing smile. “You have a pretty good memory if you’re able to remember something all the way back from Outdoor Ed.”

“You too... I can’t believe you remember what I said. You must have some kind of strategy for remembering—”

“How could I ever forget?”

Something about the way she said this felt dreamlike. A smile that only shone brighter from the twinkle of the stars spread across her face, leaving me breathless.

Yume’s slender finger went around the partition and slowly stretched out towards my face...before completely changing directions and pointing to my hand. “*Mathematical Goodbye.*”

“What?”

“That was the book you had back then. I liked it too, so it’s hard to forget. You should be grateful to Hiroshi Mori for that.”

“Oh... I see.”

I shifted my gaze back to the night sky and leaned on the railing. I did my best not to change expressions, but that didn’t stop her sadistic snickering.

“What? Is it so embarrassing for someone to find out that you’ve been treasuring a trivial memory from middle school?” she asked.

“Yeah, yeah. It’s embarrassing. So embarrassing. ’Grats on getting back at me.”

“You could stand to be a little more of a graceful loser.” Yume

rested her chin on her arms that were folded on the railing.

Maybe it was because of how she was leaning over or because of the bear pajamas, but she looked a lot younger than usual... Kinda like how she looked back when she was still the shrimp known as Yume Ayai.

“So,” Yume said, still leaning on her arms, “what would you do if I said that I liked you back then?”

I looked at Yume’s profile and she glanced back at me. It didn’t seem like she was trying to bait me.

“What would I do? I don’t know. Would it change anything?”

“Probably not... After all, I didn’t like you like that just yet back then.”

““Just yet”?”

“Forget it.” Yume covered her mouth and averted her eyes.

Apparently, that had been a slip of the tongue. As much as I wanted to tease her for it, I could tell this wasn’t the time to do that, so instead, I continued the conversation.

“What makes you bring that up now?”

“No reason. Just watching Akatsuki-san and Kawanami-san made me wonder if time spent together really changes anything.”

““Time spent together”? Hm.”

True enough. Kawanami and Minami-san had some kind of bond between the two of them—or rather, an accumulation of know-how. (I’d better keep the phrasing like this before they come out of the woodwork to protest.)

The only reason they were able to stay superficially friendly with one another was their tactfulness, plus the fact that they’d known each other since they were kids. It’s precisely because of the deep mutual understanding they’d gained from all their time together that they knew which lines not to cross and what kinds of boundaries to keep. They were great at making it seem like they were still friendly.

For people like us who only had a year and a half together under their belts, what they had was far out of our reach. Even having an extra two months or so wouldn’t be enough to change anything.

“I doubt two months would’ve changed too much,” I said without much thought.

Yume turned her head while still resting it on her arms to look at me.

“But time’s on our side because we have plenty of it...as long as dad and Yuni-san stay together, at least.”

“You think they might split up?”

“I don’t.”

If they were fawning over each other all the time like we had when we were dating, it’d make me a little worried for the longevity

of their relationship, but they were adults. That is to say, their relationship was built well enough that they didn't need to put on airs around each other. I was pretty sure that we'd stay stepsiblings for the rest of our lives.

"So we're stuck together? Ugh."

"Right?"

It was a complete joke that we had to live as stepsiblings until the end. But maybe, as we spent more time together, we could be as superficially friendly as Kawanami and Minami-san. Maybe we wouldn't be squabbling with each other over every little thing like we were now. To be honest, that sounded kinda—

"Lonely?" Yume asked, her eyes fixed on me and her face lying flat on her arms. "If you're feeling lonely, I'll keep verbally abusing you."

"You make it sound like I *want* you to abuse me," I said, rolling my eyes. "I'd really rather just keep things as is."

"Stupid. Idiot. Shitty bookworm."

"You know what?" I let out a heavy sigh and looked into her drooping eyes. "You sleepy?"

"Yeah..." she affirmed in a soft voice.

"Go inside, then. Don't blame me if you pass out here and we find your frozen corpse in the morning."

"Before that happens, I'll be sure to dig my nails into your clothes, so they find the fibers..."

"Don't say something that freaky when you're half-asleep!"

I pushed back the hand that Yume had outstretched in my direction, attempting to frame me for murder. Her hands were small yet warm. I wouldn't be surprised if she *did* end up falling asleep out here.

I was thinking about flicking her on the forehead to wake her up, but before that, I wanted to try asking her something. Her eyelids were drooping, and it seemed like she was about to drift off at any second. She was probably in her most honest, vulnerable state right now.

Different than two years ago, but still looking at the same starry sky, almost like I was talking to myself, I asked, "Was it fun?"

This was most likely her very first sleepover at a friend's house. Between all the talking, running around, and studying, I'd been wondering if she had fun this time, compared to two years ago.

Yume's eyes didn't move towards the sky and instead stayed on me. "Yeah," she said, a gentle smile on her face. "Thanks."

My eyes turned back to Yume. It was finally time to do what I'd forgotten to do two years ago.

"You're welcome."

Then I stretched my hand over to her and flicked her forehead. We were at a much closer distance than we'd been two years ago, but the partition kept us clearly separated. *But I guess it'd be okay to break it down...in an emergency.* I prayed to the sky, which wasn't all that beautiful, that a time when I'd need to would not come.



I left the Kawanami household that I was so indebted to in the afternoon and returned to the home that I knew and loved. On the other hand, Yume had made plans to hang out with Minami-san elsewhere, so I arrived at the house by myself.

I took my shoes off and then realized I should've announced that I was home. I was usually the first one home, so I'd gotten used to not having to, but... *Whatever. It's not like announcing that I'm home is that important.* I brushed off my negligence and opened the door to the living room, which was the biggest mistake of my life.

"Say 'ah'! How was that, Mine-kun? Tasty?"

"So good, Yuni-san. Can you give me another?"

"Aw, you're such a big eater. All right, say 'ah'!"

I slowly shut the door and turned around as my body violently shook. *Wh-What was that?! Oh god, I can't unsee it. I can't unwitness that!* They were nowhere close to acting their age. My parents were like some kind of middle school couple! I had seen them brazenly flirting with each other like schoolkids!

"Noooooooooooo!!!" *Oh god, I'm gonna throw up!* Fortunately, there didn't seem to be any reaction from the living room. They were most likely too fixated on each other to notice that I'd come back.

I quickly sent Yume a message over LINE.

Mizuto: Urgent summons. Dad and Yuni-san are... Oh god. Requesting your immediate return.

No more than ten minutes later, the door to our house flew open, and there stood Yume.

"What happened to them?!"

"Shh!" I raised my index finger in front of my lips and then silently gestured towards the living room.

"Huh?" Yume tilted her head in confusion, walked towards the living room, completely unaware of what lay inside, opened it, and then promptly shut it. She turned around and clutched her head.

"Aaaaahhhh!!!" Her entire body began violently shaking like mine.

Yeah! I know, right?!

"Wh-What did you just make me see?!"

"It's important that we share information about our family with

each other, isn't it?"

"You just wanted me to suffer like you!"

One could say that, yes.

We continued crouching in the hallway attached to the living room while whispering about our family.

"J-Just because they're alone, it doesn't mean that they can just— Have they just been holding back in front of us?"

"Just like we pretend to be siblings that get along, they probably pretend to be the dependable parents that we think they are."

"You don't even see *high schoolers* acting like that these days! How old are they again?"

"Let's leave it at that. I'm gonna hurl."

"What do we do?"

"What *can* we do? We just pretend we didn't see anything."

"True. All right, then—"

Just as we wrapped up our discussion, we heard a click of the door opening from behind us. We turned around, fearing what we'd see, and there was Yuni-san's youthful all-smiles face peering back at us.

"Did you two...see?"

We'd just agreed that we'd forget we saw anything, but we accidentally averted our eyes. Just as an atmosphere so heavy it made me want to run away filled the hall, Yuni-san's youthful face shifted.

"I-I'm so sorryyyyyy!" Yuni-san broke down in tears.

As children, all you can do when watching a parent cry for real is look on in confusion.

"I-I worked so hard for you to call me m-mom, b-but... Aaahhh! Sorry! Sorry that an old hag like me isn't acting her age! Waaahhh!!!"

Right now, you're really not acting your age. Seeing a parent cry for real was just about as off-putting as seeing them flirt. TIL.

At any rate, we both wanted to break free of this situation, so we stood up to comfort her.

"I-It's okay! No need to cry! You're still so youthful!"

"That's right, mom! You're totally acting your age since you're still young! I think it's a good thing! Seriously!"

"Y-You mean it?" Yuni-san's tears slowed down as she looked up at us.

We furiously nodded in agreement.

"Oh, so I *am* young... I guess people *do* tell me that a lot..."

"Yeah! Yeah, they do, right?" Yume agreed, frantically.

"So that means it's okay if we get lovey-dovey in front of you two...right?"

We averted our eyes.

"Waaaaaah!!! Mine-kuuun! Our kids are pretending to be okay

with our flirting!”

Yuni-san ran back into the living room and cried in dad’s arms. Dad patted her back, comforting her while wearing an incredibly uncomfortable look.

It’s said that in ancient times, a child grew by watching their parents’ backs. Though I had no clue what the future had in store for us, at the very least, I knew that I didn’t want to turn out like them. But watching them like this made me feel as if they would never break up. What made them so different?

The Ex-Couple Quarrel

“What do you take me for?!?!?”

In what could only be described as a folly of youth, I had a so-called boyfriend during eighth and ninth grade.

He was a pitiful person who was not only unsociable, but also inconsiderate and unathletic to boot. But against all odds, he was extremely intelligent, if nothing else. How could someone who did nothing but nap or covertly read books during class score so highly on his tests?! No matter how forgettable a person he was, the teachers paid him as much attention as they would a delinquent thanks to his good grades.

On the other hand, while I was by no means lacking in the brains department, I never once scored higher than him on a test during the entire duration of our relationship. Not a single time. Well, I may have always scored a few points higher than him in my best subject, math, but when it came to everything else, especially modern Japanese, the difference was night and day.

As much as I may not want to, I’ve accepted this gap in academic ability between us as fact. But back when we were dating, I would stupidly praise him like I was a cabaret girl after seeing that he beat me when comparing test scores.

I didn’t have the social skills to be fake nice back then, so sadly, when I did this, it was genuine. Thinking back, I wanted to scream at my younger self: “Aren’t you frustrated that you lost? Where’s your pride? Did it all fall out of your romance-addled brain, you invalid?”

It wasn’t until I completely dominated the high school entrance exam that I finally felt like a winner—like I could actually *compete*. Although, I guess there was one time before this—just one time—that the socially awkward coward known as Yume Ayai had actually tried to win.

This was back in the eighth grade during the finals of the first semester, right before summer vacation—right before our *encounter*.

A student’s job is to study, *not* to hang out with friends or flirt with their romantic partner. Schools are built for the sole purpose of studying, so hypothetically, if someone has no friends at school, it would make perfect sense for them to go to school just to study. *You have a problem with that?!*

I was a studyholic, the type of person who found fulfillment in going to school and studying...not that I really had anything else going on. I *did*, however, have a very good handle on math thanks to something extremely trivial: I really liked a character from a mystery novel who was well versed in STEM disciplines.

At any rate, the one thing I had pride in was the fact that I never lost to anyone when it came to math tests...or at least I hadn't until the math midterm in eighth grade. That was the first time I didn't get the top score in math, and the person who beat me was a guy in the same class as me, Mizuto Irido.

He was just like me—a loner. He seemed to recognize that we were of the same tribe, so to speak; he'd throw me a life raft now and then when he saw me struggling. Though I was very thankful for his help, it didn't change how I felt about him scoring higher than me. My faint pride as someone who considered math to be their best subject wouldn't allow anybody—especially not another loner like myself—to beat me. I swore that I'd win next time.

That was probably the first time in my life I'd ever felt competitive. I cut back on the hours I slept to cram in as much studying as I could ahead of the finals. I couldn't let myself lose a single point. All my calculations had to be correct. I had to do everything I could to beat Mizuto Irido, and I did. I got the top score in our class.

As the teacher praised me while giving me back my test, I nonchalantly looked over at Mizuto Irido. *How's that? I win. Too bad for you, but I don't lose much when it comes to math.*

Any feeling of excitement dissipated as I looked at him. He showed no signs of listening to the teacher's compliments, or even recognizing me. All he did was listlessly stare out the window.

How could I be so stupid? There was no reason for me to think that we were on the same wavelength just because we're both loners. Why did I think that he noticed me just because I noticed him? He doesn't even know that I'm good at math in the first place, so what was I expecting? I felt so empty. I thought we were competing, but I was the only one trying.

Then, summer vacation came, and I aimlessly visited the school library, the place where we had our *encounter*. Irido-kun grabbed a book for me from a shelf I couldn't reach, and asked, "You like mystery novels too?" Truth be told, I wasn't too surprised by this.

He was always reading books at his desk, and some of those books happened to be mystery novels. Hearing that he liked mysteries was old news to me, so he might have been under the wrong impression that the trap that a higher power had laid for us was the fact that we both liked books. In actuality, the *real* trap was the thing he said in a voice so low, I barely heard him.

“No wonder you’re so good at math.”

My heart was deeply pierced by that. I had no clue why mystery novels were linked to math in his head; there was no way that he knew that I’d gotten interested in math thanks to a mystery novel. But even so, my ears did not deceive me. I knew what I’d heard, and what I’d heard was a slight hint of frustration in his voice.

Looks like I wasn’t the only one trying, after all... He pretended not to care, but in reality, he was looking right at me. Behind his calm, cool, and collected facade was a person who was more stubborn and more of a sore loser than me.

Good grief. Looking back, I wonder if he was doing this on purpose. Would it have killed him to be more overtly frustrated? He could’ve at least hidden it better. Why would he only give me a glimpse of how he really felt? What was that, emotional indecent exposure?!

I got the wrong idea because of his actions. He made me think that we were the only people in each other’s eyes, and if he did that on purpose, he was a womanizing piece of shit. If he unintentionally made me think that, he was a clueless piece of shit. If I sound angry, that’s because with just that one sentence, he’d made me fall in love for the first time in my life.



The sound of graphite scratching against paper filled the tense silence in the self-study room. Here, each of the seats was separated by partitions in order to improve concentration. On a normal day, this room would not be so occupied, but during the buildup to midterms, it was packed on the daily.

If this were a normal high school, students would go into party mode when clubs went on study-hiatus, but not here. Not at a prep school.

Excluding idiots like me who had the stupid objective of trying to dodge her ex, people came to this school because they were studyholics and actually *liked* fighting each other for the top spot on these big tests. They weren’t the kind of people who’d wing it the night before and leave things to fate, and I wasn’t either. Or maybe I was even more serious, since I wanted to score the highest on the midterms and retain my throne.

It was almost time for school to be out for the day. I saw students beginning to pack up, so I figured I should follow suit. I put my mechanical pencil away, and just as I did, I heard a voice from behind me.

“Yume-chan, let’s walk home together!”

I turned around, and standing there were three of my friends,

including Akatsuki-san, holding their bags. These girls didn't talk about studying too often, but around test time, you could be sure that they'd be hitting the books just like everyone else.

They might not have acted like it, but our class was filled with people who scored high on the entrance exam. At their core, every last one of them, excluding Mizuto, were serious and diligent.

I quickly packed up my things and left with Akatsuki-san and two of my other friends. We walked from the self-study room through the halls to our shoe cubbies, and then past the school gates. The entire time, we exclusively talked about the test, which made sense since this was the only real free time we had. Everyone was so busy with studying that they didn't have the time to watch videos or even text each other—in my case, I just completely shut my phone off.

"I don't feel good about the midterms at all," one of my friends, Maki-san, said. "What if I fail?"

"You're aimin' for the spot at the tippy-top, right, Irido-chan?" piped up another friend, Nasuka-san.

"Well, yes, I might as well," I said nervously.

Nasuka-san gaped at me. "Wowie, that's so cool! I'm good with just bein' above average."

"That's so sad! Let's aim for the top! We might as well too!"

"Mm, nah. The number one spot's got Irido-chan's name on it already."

As they joked around, I could feel my expression grow stiff. That's right. The number one spot had *my* name on it. Me, Yume Irido, the prodigy of our freshman class.

Perhaps it was just my imagination, but I could've sworn I felt Akatsuki-san shoot me a look. Just as I thought that, she clapped her hands together as if to change the flow of the conversation entirely.

"Let's think about things to do after the test! That'll be some good motivation, right?"

"Yeah, good idea!"

"Let's go somewhere to hang!"

I nodded in agreement, soaking in the gentle atmosphere.

"I'm home," I announced as I walked through the front door after parting with my friends.

Though I'd gotten a bit relaxed on the way home, I tensed up again, preparing myself to quickly change clothes and dive back into studying. *But first, coffee.*

I walked into the living room, and lying there on the couch and reading a book was my little stepbrother.

Excuse me? I couldn't believe my eyes. Midterms were just around the corner, weren't they? So what was this guy doing just

nonchalantly reading a book without a care in the world?! I'd been forcing myself to hold off on reading and yet he's just lounging on the couch?!

"What happened to studying?" I asked in a low voice.

"I'm pretty much done. All I have to do is make sure I don't forget anything," Mizuto answered, not taking his eyes off his book.

Done? You can be "done" with studying? Urgh, he really ticks me off! He had always been this way, as far as I knew. Sure, maybe he didn't need to study; he was some kinda genius who got good grades without studying. But it still pissed me off anyway because *I* had to try so hard! *I hate him so much!*

"And *that's* why you'll never beat me," I pointedly said, venom dripping from my words.

"You say something?"

"Hmph. Forget it."

If I talked to him any longer, my motivation would crash, so I decided to save the coffee for later and turned to leave.

"Y'know..." Just as I had one foot out the door, he suddenly spoke again. "There's something I've been interested in recently."

"What? A new book?" I leered at him.

"The top spot in our grade." Mizuto sat up and gave me a teasing smile. "Wonder if the throne's comfortable."

Oh? I see. Our gazes clashed with one another.

"So sorry, but the number one spot is reserved for me."

"Then I'll just reserve it for next time."

I snorted at him and turned around, breaking our staring contest. "Yeah? Just try it. I doubt you'll be able to." I exited the living room. *You have guts; I'll give you that. This is the first time you've ever challenged me to my face.*

Any free time I could find during the day, I spent studying. I woke up early to go to school and study. During our breaks, I'd study. When school let out, I'd study in the self-study rooms or the school library. When I got home, I'd hole up in my room and study. In order to prevent myself from giving into temptation, I boxed up all the books I'd had on my shelves.

After eating dinner and taking a bath, I would go right back to my desk. I'd only sleep if I felt my concentration dwindling from fatigue. This was my life during midterm season.

"Yume! Your chopsticks!"

"Oh." Mom's voice snapped me out of the trance I was in. I quickly tightened my grip on the chopsticks I was about to drop.

Apparently, I'd been dozing off during dinner. *That was close. I need to get it together.*

“You look like you’re pushing yourself too hard,” Mineaki-ojisan said with a concerned look. “I know studying’s important, but if you don’t take care of yourself, you won’t be able to take the test at full strength, and all your effort will be wasted, Yume-chan.”

“Oh no, I’m fine. I’m only pushing myself a reasonable amount.” I laughed, trying to allay his concerns.

“If you say so...”

But of course I was pushing myself too hard. I was already busy as the top student of our year, and now that I’d decided to *stay* at the top, it stood to reason that I *needed* to push myself. That was the truth, plain and simple.

Mizuto sat across from me, looking at me emotionlessly.

As a way to wake myself up, I decided to take a bath right after dinner. I blow-dried my hair a little, changed into my pajamas, and left the bathroom. *Time to study.*

I held back a yawn and headed towards the stairs, but waiting there, sitting down, was Mizuto.

“You look tired,” he said.

I couldn’t tell what he was thinking behind those eyes of his, but they were pointed right at me. It would’ve been a waste of what little energy I had to respond to him, so I looked away and tried to pass by without saying a word.

Just as I did, Mizuto shot up and blocked my path. “Is getting the top score really *that* important?”

I couldn’t make eye contact when he was staring at me so intensely. I had no strength to keep up appearances or fight against the enemy before me. I needed to save all of this for studying.

“It’s important...” I didn’t even have the strength to lie. All the fear and anxiety that had been swirling inside of me spilled out. “I earned the top spot... I need to keep it.”

I’d changed my personality, and I’d learned how to be sociable. But I wasn’t without my limits. In the end, I was just playing pretend. I was born shy, awkward, and reclusive. Had I really expected that by changing how people thought of me, I’d actually *truly* become sociable?

That’s why I needed something extra to add to my value. Even if I was still a little awkward, people would be able to look past that. I needed the leniency that came with being an honor student. In a prep school, honor students held the most value. I needed to be the honor student character people knew me as.

“I don’t expect *you* to understand. After all, you don’t give a damn about anyone or anything around you. You’re just a wannabe loner.” Maybe it was my fatigue talking, but it felt like I was saying things I shouldn’t have. Regardless, I didn’t have any energy to spare on regret

right now.

I passed by Mizuto as I climbed the stairs. *I need to study.*

Then, from behind me, I could have sworn that I heard him mutter something like: “Yeah, you’re right...”

Finally, it was day one of midterms, and I was about to take the first test in modern Japanese.

“Everything off your desks.”

I began mumbling everything I’d studied until now while staring at the facedown answer sheet.

As an avid reader, modern Japanese played to my strengths, so I wasn’t too worried. There was only one aberrant who stood in my way. I focused my attention on my little stepbrother who was sitting in the chair behind me. As it so happened, modern Japanese was his best subject.

He placed in the top hundred during a nationwide mock exam, even though he didn’t study very hard for it. But now that he’d gone through the hell that was entrance exam studying, he could probably easily place in the top ten.

His answers had such high accuracy that it made you wonder if he was actually able to read the mind of the question writer. This meant that when it came to tests written by his teachers, he almost always got perfect scores.

If I wanted to ensure I secured my spot at the top, I needed to somehow keep our scores close in at least this subject. I had to make sure that I didn’t lose a single point.

“All right, you may begin.” As the teacher said this, the room filled with the sound of tens of papers being flipped over.

“Ugh...” I frustratedly stared at the questions sheet that I’d recorded my answers on so that I could score myself.

It was now nighttime, and I was in my room, reviewing how I did. As far as I could tell, I’d gotten over ninety points on every test I’d taken today. The only thing was that I’d gotten a ninety-four on the modern Japanese test. If Mizuto had gotten a hundred, I’d have to eat a six-point difference.

I couldn’t believe that I’d lost a whole two points because I’d messed up writing such simple kanji! At a school where fighting for an average score of ninety is the norm, a six-point difference was huge...but that’s only *if* he got a hundred.

I quietly exited my room, went downstairs, and carefully peeked into the living room. Mizuto was again on the couch, reading a book, which meant that his room was empty... Perhaps, I thought, he had also written down his answers for the same reason. If I could see that,

I'd be able to find out for sure whether or not he'd actually gotten full points.

This didn't exactly sit right with me, but it's not like I was doing anything underhanded. My scores wouldn't change whether I looked or not. The only thing I had to be careful of was being caught by him—I'd never hear the end of it. This was my only chance to find out what I needed.

I returned upstairs and quietly entered his room. I turned on the lights, waded through the sea of books strewn across his room, and found his school bag thrown on top of his bed.

I looked behind me multiple times to confirm that he wasn't coming back just yet before opening it up. I immediately saw a white piece of paper when I unclasped the fastener. *This is it.*

There were a few question sheets that'd been crammed into the bag, and as expected, there were a few scrawls that looked like answers. I was a little nervous as I pulled them out, but I reminded myself that the most important one was modern Japanese and finding out if he actually got a hundred.

I clenched my eyes shut and steeled my will before looking at his question sheet. I compared his answers against the answer list I'd brought and, to my great chagrin, he'd gotten them all right, even the ones I'd gotten wrong. There wasn't even a trace of him erasing an answer to change it.

Then I reached the final question, an essay question that was worth ten points. If you didn't allot your time correctly, you'd find yourself with a good chunk of points gone from your test in an instant. There was always the chance of receiving partial credit, but at least on my part, I knew I'd answered the question correctly.

I couldn't imagine that he'd run out of time to write the answer, which meant that in all likelihood, he'd gotten a perfect score. But just as I was accepting my fate, I looked at the part where his answer should have been written, but nothing was there.

"Huh?" I looked again, assuming I'd looked in the wrong place or something.

No, he really had written down every answer *but* this one. Did he not write it down because he didn't think he needed to grade it? No, I could tell that there were eraser marks. He'd written an answer down and *then* erased it.

He didn't even erase it that well because, as long as I squinted a bit, I could still kind of make out what had been there before. It was right. He'd erased the correct answer.

Had he erased it because he thought it was wrong and then ran out of time to write a new one? No, there was no way! No way he'd gotten tripped up by a question that I could easily answer. That only

left one option.

“On purpose...”

He'd erased his answer on purpose and left it blank. That's the only thing I could come up with after seeing how unnatural of an erasing job he'd done. Before I knew it, my hands had started to shake. I could feel my head boiling.

“It's important...”

“I earned the top spot... I need to keep it.”

Had he done this because I said all that?

“Urgh!” I wailed. *I'm not happy about this at all!*

When I came to, I stomped out of his room, down the stairs, and into the living room. He jumped a little bit in his seat on the couch and turned to me.

“Wh-What? Why are you being so nois—”

“What do you take me for?!?!?” I threw the question sheet I'd been gripping in his face.

He furrowed his brow. The guilty look on his face just confirmed my fears.

“What? You're *giving* me the top spot?! Do you think that'll make me happy?! Screw you!!! *You* were the one who had the balls to challenge me! So, what? Are you trying to say that I was going to lose if you didn't give me a helping hand?! Who the hell do you think you are?!”

“Wh-What's going on? Why are you yelling, Yume?” Mom, who was supposed to be taking her bath, heard me, but I didn't care.

I stomped closer to Mizuto. “What? Do you think sacrificing yourself is cool?! Well, it's not! Not even a little! You're just showing how little you think of me! You're looking down on me! I never asked you to do this!!!”

“Stop! Okay, I don't understand what's going on, but *stop!*” Mom held my arm that I'd cocked to deck him in the face before bending her arms around mine from behind me to hold me back. I struggled, trying to break free but to no avail. “I'm your mother! Tell me what's going on! What happened? Explain it to me! M-Mizuto-kun, what is—”

“Not my fault...” Mizuto stood up, crushing his answer sheet in his hand, and glared daggers at me.

“Huh?”

“*You're* the one who'll be in trouble if you don't get the top score... *You're* the one who said it was important to you. That's why I thought I'd give it to you! What's wrong with that?!”

“H-Huh?! Mizuto-kun?! M-Mineaki-san, come quick!” mom called as she ran out of the living room.

Mizuto walked over to me and firmly gripped my shoulders.

“What happens if I don’t get the top score? Nothing! You said it best—I don’t give a *damn* about what anyone thinks of me! That’s why I decided to give the top spot to you! Tell me what’s wrong with that! Tell me! Come on! Am I wrong?!”

“No...” There was nothing *false* about what he said. Taking all the advantages and disadvantages into account, he’d made a very logical decision. *But... But still...* “This isn’t right.” My vision blurred.

I knew this wasn’t fair, but the rampant feelings inside my head and heart wouldn’t come out as words, and instead came out as teardrops.

“Th-This isn’t like you, Irido-kun...”

This wasn’t the same frustrated-looking sore loser I’d caught a glimpse of back then. This wasn’t the Mizuto Irido that I’d thought I shared an understanding with.

“Why are you...” It sounded like Mizuto was about to get angry again, but whatever it was he was going to say, he swallowed it, and let out an exasperated sigh instead.

Then he stomped past me—ten times louder than I had been—without another word. The only sounds after that were the creaking of him opening the living room door, the thuds of him storming up the stairs, and the bang of him slamming the door to his room.

I stared at the floor as I left the living room.

“Y-Yume, are you okay?”

“What happened? It’s not like you two to fight.”

Mom and Mineaki-ojisan worriedly called out to me, but I couldn’t really answer them. All I did was silently go up the stairs to my room. When I reached my bed, I just crumpled onto it as if the string holding me up had snapped.

What had I expected? I now knew that our “mutual” understanding had been all in my head. That was something I should’ve learned during this turbulent half year. I should’ve known by now that it was all just a delusion that was too good to be true.

There was no way that he, of all people, would ever face me just as himself—as an equal. I was crazy for thinking that’d ever happen. I really was just competing by myself.

“Whatever. Why should I care?”

This just meant that I had one fewer rival. That’s all it meant. That’s all. I should be happy. I’d be able to keep my top spot. If I didn’t keep it, I wouldn’t be able to stay the same person I was now. That’s what everyone expected from me, after all.

Day two of the midterms.

I’d fallen asleep just like that, so I didn’t end up studying at all. But even so, I’d already studied a lot, so if anything, a good night’s

rest dispelled my fatigue and put me in perfect condition.

Mizuto and I didn't exchange a single word at the breakfast table. As we ate our toast in silence, both mom and Mineaki-ojisā kept shooting us worried glances. Who could blame them after yesterday? I had no desire to try and pretend like we were on good terms.

"Thanks for the food..." After finishing my breakfast quickly, I left for school earlier than usual.

The biggest threat to me had dropped out on his own, and one of today's tests was my best subject—math. As long as I put my usual effort in, I was sure to secure the top score in our grade.

I put on my shoes, and just as I was about to leave, a voice interrupted me.

"You don't get to determine what *is* and *isn't* like me."

My heart jumped. I turned around and saw Mizuto in his uniform staring at me through sleepy eyes.

"Similarly, nobody gets to decide what is and isn't like *you*," he said angrily, making my heart jump more.

It felt like he was seeing right through me—like I was wearing my heart on my sleeve. I couldn't return any kind of meaningful words in the moment, and while I tried to scramble for some kind of answer, he put on his shoes next to me. He glanced at me as he put his hand on the doorknob. It was then that I finally realized he had bags under his eyes.

"I'm putting an end to your high school glow-up, little stepsis. Savor it while you can."

Then, without even giving me a chance to respond, he disappeared out the door, leaving me completely dumbfounded. There was only one thing left for me to say.

"I'm your *older* stepsister, little stepbro."

I'm not going to let the likes of you decide who I am.

As was customary, the top fifty scores for the midterm were currently being posted on the announcement board by our teacher. Getting your name on the board wasn't too difficult a feat, though, because there were about two hundred people in our year. You just needed to be in the seventy-fifth percentile.

The announcement board was crowded with students, and I was at the front. As soon as I had arrived, people had opened a path for me. It was proof that I was acknowledged by everyone as the person who deserved to check the rankings first.

There wasn't really any need for me to check, though, because there was no one left to oppose me since my biggest competition, Mizuto, took himself out of the running. I was all but assured to have secured my spot at the top.

Of course, this was because I'd already scored myself at home, and it was more than obvious that I'd gotten myself a very comfortable number of points. I would've done even better if I'd caught myself before making some careless errors, but there was nothing I could do about that now.

As soon as our teacher finished hanging up the results and moved away so that everyone could look, the students around me started buzzing, and I let out a sound of happiness.

Right there, at number one was my name...or at least half of it. "Irido" was certainly the last name there, but that was the only part of my name that was written.

1st Mizuto Irido: 777/800 points

2nd Yume Irido: 774/800 points

There was no mistake. This was what was printed on the board. No matter how many times I looked at it, there was no change.

I... I lost? I lost the lead I got from modern Japanese?

"Whoa, for real?"

"The Irido siblings with the one-two finish?!"

"Sheesh, it's neck and neck."

"Irido-san was dethroned already?"

For some reason, I couldn't really hear what anyone was saying. All my focus was turned to searching for Mizuto. I looked to my right, then to my left, and finally I saw someone slowly backing out of the crowd.

"E-Excuse me, I need to get through!"

I clawed my way through the crowd and chased after the guy who was casually waltzing away. I grabbed his shoulder, forcing him to face me.

A really nasty smile crept across his face. "Well, well, if it isn't the *second-best* student of our year. How are you doing on this fine day?"

I wasn't in the right state of mind to continue this contest of insults. I had way too many questions to try and be discreet, so I just asked him straight out.

"How, how did you— You gave me a huge handicap and still came out on top? You didn't even study that hard! You were able to turn the tables just after *one* all-nighter?! That's not—"

"Like me"? Was that what you're gonna say?"

I clammed up, which made Mizuto just nastily grin at me even more.

"I told you from the start that I've been interested in what the top spot's like."

"Huh?"

"But, I messed up. This throne isn't comfortable at all."

What? Could he have possibly...

"I envy you. The weight on the shoulders of the *second-best* student's gotta be a lot lighter." My little stepbrother, who was now shouldering the title of top student of our grade, turned his back to me after saying this. "Later. If you want the throne so bad, you'd better bring your A game come finals, *Miss Honor Student*." He didn't even try to hide how sarcastic he was being, calling me that.

But the fact that it actually bothered me when he called me that was proof that my standing in the school had changed.

"Aw, you were so close, Irido-san!" I jumped a little and turned around as I felt someone suddenly grab my shoulder. Two of my friends were there.

"It sucks that you didn't get first with that score! Irido-kun's got some big brains," Maki Sakamizu-san, a tall, cool girl with short hair, said. She looked even more frustrated than me.

"There's always a higher peak. I dunno if we can keep up," Nasuka Kanai-san, a girl with a bob cut, said in a sleepy voice, like a cat waking up after a nap, leaning forward slightly, as if she had a hunch.

"You're one to talk; you're forty-fifth! That's higher than me!"

"For reals? I didn't check at all. Thankies for lettin' me know."

"Urgh, you really piss me off, you Kyoto native!"

Wait... What's going on? I couldn't comprehend what was happening. My friends were acting the same as they always did, poking fun at each other. This wasn't anything like what I'd imagined. This was completely different than the disaster I'd feared.

What was supposed to happen if I didn't keep the top spot again? Nothing had changed. The way they talked to me, their expressions—not a single thing had changed, even though I was now number two.

Oh. I see now. It was me all along. I was the only one who was so fixated on my place as the top student.

Mizuto's words suddenly played in my head: "Similarly, nobody gets to decide what is and isn't like you."

The bags under his eyes that I'd seen on the second day of midterms must have been because of the studying he'd done... It had been all for this.

"Ah..." My head dropped, and I covered my face.

My friends patted my back in a panic.

"D-Don't cry, Irido-san!"

"Second place's still real impressive!"

No, that's not what I'm crying about. I'm not crying because I lost. I'm crying because I wasn't the only one competing. He really did notice me.

How did he know? How did he understand me? Wasn't this all supposed to be *my* misunderstanding? I had thought this was all my delusion. Why now? Why did he have to be like that?

Who else but you? I suck at communicating, I'm bad with words, and I don't have any real social skills—who else but a weirdo like you could read my mind so easily? It's like you're a psychic. How am I supposed to live without you? Hey, tell me, what are you going to do about this? Please, tell me.



After midterms ended, peace returned to the school. Right now I was walking with Mizuto, heading towards the school library after classes ended.

“Why are you following me?” he asked, glancing over at me.

“Am I not allowed to? There’s a book I want to read now that tests are over.”

“Uh-huh.”

That was a lie, though. My real purpose was to find the right timing to apologize for screaming at him. Things had gone back to normal for the most part, but neither of us had apologized yet. I’d be the bigger person if I was the one who apologized first, so I wanted to make sure I did.

To be clear, I wasn’t sticking with him because I wanted to be close to him. It was because being nearby meant that I’d have all the opportunities in the world to apologize.

“Oh, it’s the Irido siblings.”

“Huh? The number one and two students?”

“Hm? So that’s them?”

Ever since the test results had been announced, people noticed us more than before whenever we were together. I was used to the attention, but Mizuto looked like he absolutely hated it. *Serves you right. This is what you get for stealing my spot.* I was still mad about losing, but that was to be expected.

When we arrived at the library, Mizuto pointed to a shelf in the back of the library.

“Mystery section’s around there.”

“Oh.” I looked at another shelf. “What about over there?”

“Light novels. It’s mostly filled with old ones, but there’s a pretty big selection to choose from. You finally interested in them?”

“Not a chance. There are no mystery light novels.”

“Don’t blame me if you get killed by the Fujimi Mystery Books fan club.”

I headed over to the mystery section while Mizuto headed to the corner of the library where the light novels were. It seemed that he was currently in a light novel phase.

I looked up and down the bookcase filled with an assortment of books. I was surprised by how diverse the selection was and wished

that I'd come here sooner.

As I pulled out a book that I'd never read before, I peeked out from behind the bookcase and saw the section in the corner of the library he'd disappeared to.

Maybe I should just pass by him while he's picking out a book and apologize? It was only fair since he'd passed by me, spouted whatever nonsense he wanted, and left me standing here. He deserved the same treatment of a drive-by apology. *I might be a genius. All right, let's do it.*

I carried the book I'd picked out and approached the light novel corner that he should have been behind. Just as I got close, I heard a soft yelp and the sound of books falling.

"Sorry," Mizuto said in a low voice.

Mizuto ran into someone? I heard a loud noise. *I wonder what's going on.* I was getting severe déjà vu because I felt like something similar had happened in the past. I quickened my pace and peeked around the corner of the bookshelf.

Books with colorful covers were scattered across the floor, and a girl—a plain-looking girl—was trying to pick them all up in a panic.

For a second, I thought it was the same girl that I'd seen Mizuto with before our aquarium date, but I was wrong. Instead of two low pigtails, she had a short, frizzy bob cut—I figured she probably hadn't bothered to comb her bedhead or something. She was also a good five centimeters taller than the girl from before. I bet if Akatsuki-san saw how tall she was, she'd be jealous.

But the biggest difference by far was her chest, which looked like it was carrying a library of books itself. *S-So big...* They were so big that they stretched her school sweater. Needless to say, they really jumped out at you. Akatsuki-san often spoke of how jealous she was of my chest, but this was like a David and Goliath situation. How could I call myself big chested in front of these? *F-cup?! Maybe even G-cup?!*

As I began to be filled with fear of these huge breasts that I'd only seen on the cover of light novels, Mizuto picked a book off the floor. She let out another yelp and glanced at Mizuto before looking at the ground.

She must've been embarrassed. Well, that only made sense. It was embarrassing for someone to find out what you're into.

"This series..." As Mizuto spoke, both the girl and I looked at Mizuto with surprise.

His expression wasn't fake or calculated in the slightest—no, it was the genuine face of someone who'd found someone else interested in the same thing.

"You like this series too?"

And this is how I saw that moment firsthand—the moment when a higher being's trap was sprung on someone other than me.



The Ex-Girlfriend Will Not Get Jealous

“Thank you for being friends with Mizuto.”

What is a “friend”? If this sounds like it’s being asked by someone who has no friends, that’s because it pretty much is. I’m a guy who has virtually no experience making friends. I never had any interest in connecting with others in school; I’d only ever made “acquaintances” with others purely for convenience.

I may have hung out with Kogure Kawanami in high school, but he wasn’t what I would call a friend. More than anything, we were just two members of the same support group for traumatized victims—comrades in misery, sure, but not “friends” as he might have considered us to be. Which brings me back to my initial question: “What is a ‘friend’?” Also, at what point are you friends with someone?

“Oh, you need help defining what a friend is, Mizuto-kun? You’ve come to the right person. Fortunately, this is one of the few topics I am an expert on,” Isana Higashira said, hugging her knees as she sat on top of the air conditioning unit in the school library. “You’re wondering where it is that, on the scale of human relations, ‘friendship’ is located, right? Are you friends if you know their name? If you talk to them? Mutual friends on LINE? What an interesting topic! Let us burrow in and get to the bottom of this!”

“I’ve never seen someone get so fired up by this topic before, Higashira. Also, don’t you mean, ‘dig in’?”

“Well, just think about it! Depending on where you draw the lines of friendship, you could say that the student on morning duty who checked my homework submission status is my friend.”

“All right, let’s not set the bar *that* low.”

“Or, perhaps, once someone you’re close with starts being bullied, you distance yourself and tell others that they aren’t *really* your friend. Wow, I may have just stumbled upon the discovery of the century!”

“Somehow, I get the feeling you don’t have any friends in the first place.” I knew I wasn’t really one to talk, but I wasn’t wrong.

“That is what we call a contradiction, Mizuto-kun. Do you know of the Epimenides paradox?” she asked, resting her expressionless face on her knees.

“Yep. For the record, I also know what ‘probatio diabolica’ and ‘Hempel’s paradox’ are.”

“Curses! You pulled out all the logic arguments before I could!”

“Heh, think twice before challenging me with your paltry light novel knowledge. So anyway, how does the Epimenides paradox apply here?”

“If I am incapable of making friends, then what does that make you, the person I’m happily chatting with?” she asked, tilting her head while looking at me next to her.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to get at. I’m wondering how we’d define our relationship.”

“I think of you as a friend. If I saw you getting bullied, I would join you in victimhood.”

“How about you save me instead? You’re completely unreliable.”

“‘Completely’? My, I appreciate that.” Her expression remained the same, but she swayed from side to side.

As I watched her, I couldn’t help but think that if she was willing to stick her neck out for me and share my pain in this hypothetical bullying situation, wouldn’t that give her *best friend* status?

At any rate, I think it’s time that I introduce the girl that I’ve been chatting with. Her name should at least be obvious by now—Isana Higashira. She’s the first friend I’ve ever felt so connected to in my life. I was sure that no matter how long I lived, I wouldn’t find as good a friend as her, and I had no doubt that she felt the same about me.

Though the school library had been my typical hangout spot since school started, recently it had been my *only* spot. I’d naturally head to the library after classes were over. It was usually deserted at that time of day, save for the one bespectacled librarian who’d be quietly reading a book at the check-out counter. Thinking back to how packed it’d been during midterm season, I found it hard to believe that this was the same place.

That being said, the library only *looked* deserted. I headed over to the corner of the library with a bookshelf in front of it—a spot hidden from anybody looking in from the doorway. There, boldly sitting on the shelflike air conditioner attached to the wall, was a girl.

Her school-assigned shoes were on the floor with her socks rolled into a ball and stuffed into them, leaving her barefoot. She sat with her knees in her arms and her feet touching the edge of the air conditioner, idly moving her toes. One might think that because of the way she was sitting, the contents of her skirt would be on full display, but she was clearly used to sitting like this, because everything was perfectly covered up by the hem of her skirt.

She was bent forward and resting her head on her knees while blankly staring at a book, *The Disappearance of Haruhi Suzumiya*, published by Kadokawa Sneaker Bunko.

“Yo, Higashira. Today’s a Haruhi kinda day, huh?” I asked, lightly sitting next to her.

I had reservations about putting my full weight on the air conditioner since it wasn’t built to be sat on.

“Incorrect, Mizuto-kun. Today is a *Nagato* ‘kinda’ day,” she said, turning a page. “I am in the mood to be doted on by a small-framed bespectacled girl, and Nagato is at her absolute best in *Disappearance*, no matter how many times I read it. I want a girlfriend like her.”

“Couldn’t you just wear glasses?”

“Mizuto-kun, I do not think you understand. Would you tell a pining boy to make a 3D model and become a beautiful girl himself?”

“I think there are more people than you think who’d be satisfied with that.”

“How sad. Have you truly never imagined having a small, dignified, glasses-wearing girlfriend? Are you certain that you’re a human?”

“I am. Do you think that anyone who doesn’t subscribe to your worldview is a psychopath?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Really?”

It didn’t seem like she was joking. When thinking about small girls with glasses, the first person that came to mind was Minami-san when she dressed up as one. However, someone else popped up if the word “dignified” came into play.

With that in mind, I couldn’t exactly deny that I wanted a girl like that at some point. *Looks like I’m not a psychopath after all.*

“Now that I think about it, you never really talk about your beloved characters. No need to be embarrassed, Mizuto-kun. Your secret is safe with me. Tell me all about how your first love was Asuna.”

“I’m not embarrassed, and I’ve never been in love with Asuna.”

“Huh? So Mikoto Misaka then? I see now...”

“Why are you so convinced that my first love was a light novel character?” *My first love was a real person!*

I suppose it’s obvious by now, but Isana Higashira was a light novel reader. I wasn’t exactly sure whether or not this was rare for a girl, but at the very least, I’d never met any girl who was such an avid fan of light novels.

She boasted that she’d read about ten of the hundred light novels that are released each month, which is about as many as she could buy with her allowance. Either way, her reading habits were a perfect

match for a variety reader like myself.

Light novels covered all kinds of genres, from action, to rom-com, to sci-fi, to mystery. Because of that, she had a surface-level understanding of all sorts of things, making it possible for her to keep up with whatever I talked about to a certain extent. For example, if I started talking about Lovecraft, she'd bring up *Nyaruko-san*. If I mentioned Osamu Dazai, she'd bring up *OreGairu*. She was the complete opposite of a *certain someone* who could only talk about mysteries.

It'd only been a few days since I met Higashira here, but since neither of us had other friends to discuss books with, we'd become close enough that we would hang out here every day after school, reading books and sharing stupid things on our phones.

At first, I'd found it strange how formally she spoke despite our budding friendship, but in her words: "My policy is to speak to everyone the same way. I struggle to know when to be casual and when not to be, so this way is easiest." In my head, I wondered when she'd be given the luxury of talking to so many people that this would be a problem, but ultimately, I just accepted it as logical.

Also, though we may have talked a bit when we met, we usually just sat in silence and read our respective books. In general, talking wasn't allowed in the library, and we needed to respect that rule even if we were hidden away in the corner.

She'd sometimes make audible gasps when she found illustrations she wanted to share with me, but for the most part, we just sat together as two readers—or otakus, I guess. As we sat there, the clock crept ever closer to the school's closing time.

"My, already this late?" Higashira observed before attempting to reach for her shoes and socks on the floor without getting up. "Hm, I cannot seem to reach them. How troubling. If only my breasts didn't protrude so much..."

"Stop trying to show off."

Her chest squished against her bent knees as she leaned into them. That sight was enough to make even self-proclaimed feminists complain. Apparently, since she had nothing else to be proud of, she made an effort to be proud of her chest.

"Mizuto-kun, could you put my socks and shoes on for me, please?"

"Again?"

"I mind not."

"You should! Let's not make this a habit."

As she requested, I helped pull her socks over her bare feet and then inserted them into her shoes. It was almost like helping a child, but she seemed to enjoy being pampered like this. Then, for the first

time in a few hours, Higashira's feet touched solid ground.

"Shall we?"

"Yeah."

We left the library together, continuing our chat in the hall while heading towards the stairs. It turned out that our routes home were the same up to a certain point, so we'd made a habit of walking together up until then.

"Why are we all so drawn to beautiful, big-breasted girls who have one eye covered? Is that not a huge security flaw in our DNA?"

"What do you mean 'we'? I don't get off to those kinds of girls."

"There you go with your *humor* again," she said, sliding her bangs over one of her eyes.

"Knock it off. Don't cover your eye, titty monster." More accurately, according to her, she was a G-cup and had no problem showing it off.

As we reached the stairs, we were met with a familiar pair of people. One was a faux honor student with long, black hair, and the other was a faux innocent critter with a ponytail. In other words, it was Yume Irido and Akatsuki Minami.

"Oh heya, Irido-kun! Headin' home?" Minami-san said in a bright voice, skipping towards me. "Were you chillin' in the library till now? And...who's she?" As soon as Minami-san's gaze landed on Higashira, she hid behind me.

"A-A socialite! A real-life socialite, Mizuto-kun!" She cowered behind me as if she were a squirrel that'd encountered a predator.

The way Higashira was acting now made it seem as if Minami-san was bigger than her, when in fact, she was taller than her at about five foot three. That being said, I was sympathetic to her feelings since I, too, was a social recluse. For the time being, I ignored her and replied to Minami-san as Higashira tightly squeezed the back of my uniform.

"This is Isana Higashira. I just met her recently and it turns out we've got a lot in common. She's in...class 1-3, I think?"

"I-Indeed, I am in class 1-3."

"As you can see, she's shy, so just be sure to mind your distance, okay?"

"Hm, you two met recently and have a lot in common? Interesting..." Minami-san peeked around my back. Higashira tried to avoid her gaze by moving to the other side of me.

Isn't that a little rude, Higashira?

"It's not every day that you talk so fondly of someone, Irido-kun. You two must be close."

"I guess."

"Has Yume-chan met her yet?"

"I don't think—" I looked over at Yume, who was observing us

from a distance, but just as I did, her eyes closed into slits and she let out a “hmph.” She turned her back to me, her black hair spinning with her.

“Let’s go, Akatsuki-san. We don’t want to be here when the school gates close.”

“Oh, right! Well, see ya tomorrow, Irido-kun!” she said as she skipped back to Yume. They walked away together.

After they were gone, Higashira finally came out from behind my back.

“The other girl... She seems so far out of our league. Are you friends with her, Mizuto-kun?”

“That’s my little sister.”

“Your little sister?”

“My little stepsister.”

“Your stepsister?!”

For some reason, the “step” part surprised her a lot more than the “little sister” part.

“Oh my god... A protagonist... A light novel protagonist is right in front of me...”

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t think that myself, so I can’t even say you’re wrong...” *I wonder how she’d react if she knew that she was my ex too.*

“Might I inquire about a few things regarding you and your stepsister?” she asked, but continued on anyway. “So she’s your stepsister... Pray tell, is it safe to assume that she is a lover of brothers?”

“Don’t try to apply your warped world views to our situation. She’s my little sister, yeah, but that doesn’t mean she’s a brother lover.”

“Is that so?”

“Brother lovers only exist in myths. It even says so on Wikipedia,” I added, walking away from her to change into my outdoor shoes.

“Truly?!” Higashira pulled out her phone to look it up. “No, it certainly does not!”

“That’s because it was deleted after being tagged with ‘citation needed,’ ‘personal research?’, ‘from where?’, and ‘from whom?’”

“So it was all just the editor’s delusions!”

Yume

My little stepbrother had befriended a girl. This may not have been that big of a deal to anyone else, but to me, it was like heaven and earth had been switched. I mean seriously, *that* guy? He’s gloomy, sarcastic, uncommunicative, overly logical, and closed off to the world. You’re telling me *that* guy made friends with a girl?!

Plus...she was calling him by his first name. *Seriously, they're on a first-name basis?! What the hell? It took me about a week until I could kind of call Akatsuki-san by her first name, and she's calling him by his first name within a few days of meeting him?! I don't even call him by his first name in private!*

I truly never thought this day would come. It didn't even cross my mind that there would be a girl out there who could actually get along with him. Somewhere in my head, I'd convinced myself that he'd never get close to anyone—that he'd never fall in love again.

"Urrrgh!" I began punching my pillow for some reason.

Why was I so upset? What was annoying me so much? The way I was acting almost made it seem as if I were...jealous. It was almost like that time when I'd said all those unnecessary things that led to us fighting—the catalyst to our breakup.

After remembering that, I buried my face in my pillow. *I... I don't want to feel like that ever again, but at this rate, history's going to repeat, and I'm going to do something I shouldn't. I won't have grown as a person at all. I won't have learned my lesson.* I couldn't let that happen. I wasn't the same person I'd been in middle school.

I couldn't let myself get hung up on small things, be really stubborn even though I'm weak willed, or say something unnecessary and throw everything out of the window. *The girl who used to do that is gone. I'm Yume Irido now, not Yume Ayai.*

I lifted my head, took a deep breath, and then exhaled. I pushed out my past self whose feelings were all over the place and returned to my new self—the one that I'd carefully sculpted. I was calm now. My mind was clear, operating as smoothly as an HDD that had its memory cleared. It was like all the muddled feelings inside me had been solved as easily as a math problem.

I refuse to be jealous. How could I get jealous when I wasn't dating him? I was just his stepsibling. QED. Case closed.

"Okay." After going through a logical process that would have made Ellery Queen proud, I got up from my bed and changed out of my school uniform into my at-home clothes.

I fixed my mussed-up hair and shifted my gaze to the top of my desk. There lay the books I wanted to read that had piled up while I had been studying. I pulled a book out from the pile. It was a translation of a mystery written by S.S. Van Dine.

As stated in Van Dine's *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories*, "To introduce amour is to clutter up a purely intellectual experience with irrelevant sentiment."

Mizuto

"Going to the library?"

“Yeah, what’s it to you?”

“Hm, have fun,” Yume said before leaving the classroom with Minami-san.

I watched her walk away, squinting slightly because I felt like something was off with her—like some kind of burden had been lifted from her, or she’d become indifferent. Why wasn’t I getting annoyed? I usually did whenever I talked with her.

“What’s the matter, Irido? Why’re you gazing off in Irido-san’s direction? Wait, you’re glaring.” Kawanami approached me with a wide grin, but after seeing my face, he recoiled in fear.

What a good question, Kawanami. I’d love to redirect that question to her, but whatever. Two months had passed since we’d begun living together. It made sense that we’d fallen into our own routines by now.

“Later, Kawanami. I’m going to the library.”

“Got it. You’ve been goin’ there every day recently. Is the library that much fun?”

“Yeah, it’s about as fun as your room.”

“Don’t make it sound like my room’s some kind of theme park!”

If you count all the embarrassing history in it as attractions, I think it is.

I parted with Kawanami and walked down the hall to the library. When I arrived, I went straight to the corner of the library, and just as I expected, sitting in front of the light novel section on top of the air conditioner by the window was Isana Higashira.

“You always get here so fast, Higashira.”

“Of course. I leave class immediately since I have no friends there.”

“You poor soul. I guess I’ll hang out with you today as well.”

“Heh heh.” Higashira rocked her body side to side happily.

Even if her expression didn’t change, it didn’t mean that she was bad at expressing herself. According to her, she just didn’t really have the muscle strength to change her facial expression.

I sat down next to her, and we began talking as we usually did while looking at the various titles on the bookcase in front of us. Our conversation shifted from books to recent events, which naturally reminded me of how Yume was acting weird.

“There’s something off about my little stepsister.”

“The person from yesterday? I require further explanation.”

“She’s...nicer? No, that’s not it. She’s just acting nicer than usual, I guess. I’m not annoyed when I talk to her. She doesn’t interrupt me when I talk either, so conversations with her have been smooth and easy, no matter what we talk about.”

“I’m not sure I understand the issue.”

“You have a point...”

Now that I thought about it, this was probably the first time since I went to Kawanami for help with Minami-san that I'd asked anyone for advice. What I needed help with now was nowhere near as dire, though.

"Hm. Allow me to be honest for a moment. I don't believe I'm the right person to ask if you want advice on how to deal with people."

"Sorry for thinking that you were. That was really rude of me to assume."

"My, *that's* awfully rude of you!" Higashira bumped her shoulder into mine out of playful anger.

I pushed back on her in retaliation, which just led her to putting her entire body weight on me. *Hey, take it easy.*

"Anyway, would it not be faster to ask her instead of me?"

"You have a point..."

"You are ever-unchanging, Mizuto-kun. I'm a little worried you might be an imbecile."

"What'd you call me?! Remind me, what was your score on the midterms?"

"W-Well, my best subject is not something evaluated by midterms, so... Ouch!"

In response, I drilled my thumbs into the temples of this below-average student while falling into deep thought. *She has a point. All I have to do is ask.* I wasn't exactly short of opportunities to do so since, as regrettable as it was, we lived together. Why hadn't I thought of this in the first place? Because I didn't want to talk to her? Because we weren't on good terms? If that was the case, then why did I have to bother with her at all? If anything, wasn't the way she was acting now better? She was much easier to deal with. *Yes, logically, I just need to let sleeping dogs lie.*

"I think you need to follow your heart," Higashira unwittingly said through teary eyes.

"My heart...?"

"A-Ah, forget what I said. You need not follow advice from the likes of me. My apolo—"

"No, keep talking. I'll be the one to decide whether or not I follow your advice." I took my thumbs off her temples and looked into her eyes.

Higashira let out a groan of embarrassment, and her eyes darted back and forth. But after a while, she opened her mouth and continued talking.

"Well, what I meant was that everyone has their own set of rules, right? If all those rules were followed, they would have their ideal world—does that make sense?"

"Uh-huh."

“When I find that my rules are being threatened, I get very defensive, not dissimilar from a chained-up feral animal. Allegedly, when that happens, I am unable to read the room—”

“Read the room’...” It sounded like Higashira was losing her train of thought and straying away from her original point, but hearing her say that made something click for me. “I get it now. I was *reading* her.”

“Mizuto-kun?”

“Thanks, Higashira, that was really helpful,” I said, looking into her eyes before continuing. “Being able to read the room is important, but not when it comes to me.”

“Huh?”

“It’s all about having the right person with the right tools for the job. That’s why it’s faster if I just read the room first.”

There are proper rules to being close with someone. If you’re friends, there might have been some need to read the room, but with family—with *her*—there was no need to do that. It wasn’t like me at all.

“Th-Thank you...” Higashira said, confusedly, in a soft voice.

Yume

It was currently our lunch break, and we were eating on a bench in the courtyard on this strangely bright June day.

“Did your little bro find himself a filly?” Nasuka-san asked in her usual sleepy and oblivious tone.

Surprisingly, the one who froze at this question wasn’t me, but Maki-san. “Wait, what? Huh?! He has a girlfriend? Gimme the deets!” she demanded, sitting up straight and looking right at Nasuka.

“Hm, I dunno much, but I saw him walkin’ home yesterday with some girl. She was a quiet-looking thing—totes a good match for him—so I just kinda figured that the two of them’re goin’ steady.”

“Oh, Higashira-san, right? I’ve met her!” Akatsuki-san said before sipping the milk out of the carton she’d bought from the school store. “They said they’re just friends, but who knows? It’s kinda weird that they’re meeting up every day even though they’re in different classes.”

“What’s she like?! Cute?” Maki-san asked, her eyes gleaming.

“She’s not really much to look at, but I guess a diamond in the rough? Oh, and her boobs are stupid big.”

“This is a good opportunity to tell you that you look at other peoples’ boobs way too much, Minami-chan.”

“Can you blame me? I’m so jealous! I want stiff shoulders too! Look at how not-stiff *my* shoulders are!” Akatsuki-san effortlessly rolled her shoulders over and over, much to the amusement of Maki-san, who laughed and clapped her hands together.

“So what’s the dealio? Are they an item?” Nasuka-san asked, temporarily taking her mouth away from the jelly drink she was holding.

“Maybe? I’m not sure,” I said, still not freezing up.

“Hmm...” Nasuka-san seemed no longer interested and went back to sipping her jelly drink.

Personally, I think I did great. If this were past me, I would have been all over the place, but now, I could calmly answer these kinds of questions without losing my head. I think I deserved full marks for this performance as someone who’d only recently met their new stepsibling.

It was now the end of the school day. I hadn’t ended up joining a club, so I walked home with Akatsuki-san instead. In contrast, Maki-san was in the basketball club and Nasuka-san was in the competitive karuta club, so it wasn’t often that all four of us would go home together.

I wasn’t too surprised about Maki-san being in a club; it felt on-brand for someone with as much energy as her. Nasuka-san, on the other hand, seemed to live life on battery saver mode, so I was shocked when I learned she was in a club. Apparently, she’d joined the Karuta club to search for a way to get cards with the least amount of movement possible.

If anything, I was more surprised by the fact that Akatsuki-san hadn’t joined any clubs. All the athletic clubs had tried to coax her into joining, but she’d flat-out refused every last one of them. She’d said that going home with me was more important than anything else.

She politely played down any claim that she was athletic, when in reality, she was—to an incredible extent. She just didn’t like exercising.

“Yume-chan, you’ve been pretty calm lately,” Akatsuki-san said, hopping in front of me and turning around. “I feel like you used to be a little jumpier before, but now it’s like you have everything under control.”

“You think so? It might be because I’ve settled into my new lifestyle. As you know, it was a big change.”

“Ah, that makes sense.” Akatsuki-san skipped in front of me while looking up at the slightly cloudy sky. “I like you the way you are now, Yume-chan.”

“Huh?”

“You have an older sister vibe to you. I’m an only child, so I’ve always wanted an older sister.”

Me? An older sister? My mouth curved into a smile. *Oh, so that’s how she sees me. Me!* I felt so happy. It felt like I really had grown.

“Thank you, Akatsuki-san. Feel free to rely on me if you ever need any help. Don’t hold back,” I said, acting like I was actually her big sister.

“Yay! I love you, big sis!” A bright smile spread across her face.

I let out a small yelp of surprise as she jumped onto me. She rubbed her face against mine affectionately, latching onto me tighter.

“Heh heh, you smell so nice, sis.”

“H-Hey, hold back a little!”

She hit the gas a lot harder than I’d expected her to. I peeled Akatsuki-san off of me, and as I did, she burst out laughing, making me laugh too. *Oh, this is such a delight. This is such a nice change of pace from all the time I’ve spent worrying about that guy, getting pissed off by him, and being embarrassed by him!*

It felt like I had finally been freed from the trap that I’d fallen for two years ago. I was free. I could brush off anything that guy threw at me. *Suck on that!*

After parting with Akatsuki-san, I elatedly walked to the entrance of the house, light as a feather. Just yesterday, I’d had to mentally prepare myself to even cross the threshold, but I didn’t need to today. I had nothing to be bothered by. I had no reason to lose my cool over something as trivial as living in the same house as him. We were nothing more than stepsiblings. You’re supposed to feel at ease around family members, not tense.

It had taken me two months, but I’d finally had a revelation: all I had to do was ask him about Higashira-san as his family member. If they really were dating, then as his older sister, albeit stepsister, it made sense for me to stick my nose into their business—

“Welcome home.”

But before I could finish my thought, I froze, because waiting for me in the entranceway was the manifestation of my ideal guy.

“H-Huh?”

Neatly styled hair, perfectly coordinated outfit, and a tall, slender body to go with it. Then, to finish it all off, intellectual-style glasses. This was the exact fashionable outfit that Mizuto Irido had worn on our date.

“Huh?!”

My mind couldn’t keep up with this pleasant but extremely surprising sight, but the hot guy—Mizuto, that is—paid no heed to my blubbling. He jammed his feet into his shoes and walked towards me. *Uh, no. Nonono. Don’t come near me in that outfit! I can’t— My heart!*

He grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me in. I staggered forward, inching closer to his face. *Huh? What’s happening? What’s going on? What’s he going to do to me? What’s he thinking?!* *This is the front door!*

Just as I was thinking that, he pressed his fingers to my wrist as if he was trying to take my pulse. No, he wasn't *trying* to, he *was* taking my pulse.

"Most people have a pulse of one beat per second. Your heart's obviously beating twice as fast." A faint smile appeared on Mizuto's face as he stated this practically in my ear. "So tell me, my dear little stepsister, is it normal for your heart to be racing this much just from seeing your stepsibling wearing different clothes?"

"Ah..."

He was doing the same thing I had done to him on Mother's Day! H-How careless of me! This had to be karma for saying that involuntary spasms counted. I tried thinking as hard as I could to get myself out of this hole that I'd dug for myself. *I can totally do this!*

"I-I was just a little surprised, that's all! People's hearts beat faster when they're surprised!"

"Oh, so you're just surprised?" Mizuto fixed his eyes on me through his glasses.

For some reason, I couldn't look away. *Agh, this just highlights his long eyelashes, thin lips, and perfect nose!*

"This..."

"This'?"

"This isn't fair!!!"

I totally *couldn't* do it. All I could do was cover my face and hang my head. *It's not my fault! It's a really hot look! It has nothing to do with him being my stepbrother! I can't ignore the things I love!*

"Hey, how about we amend the rules?" I suggested.

"Oh yeah? How?"

"Involuntary spasms don't count."

"Sure. Starting after this," he said, shooting me a very skeptical look before letting go. "Now that I have your attention... Listen here, little sis. If you're wondering why I went through all this trouble, it's because I have something to say to you."

"What...?" I tried my best to avert his gaze.

"I really hate who you've become," he declared.

"Huh?" I inadvertently looked at him again, and saw that he'd angrily folded his arms.

"You're weirdly calm. Plus, you're acting like you're really perceptive. I don't get even the slightest bit angry when talking to you. You don't shoot me any sarcastic or biting comments anymore either, and you don't try to fight me on anything. I hate absolutely everything about you right now."

"Wha— Huh?!" *Where in that long-winded tirade was there anything bad?!*

"If there's something on your mind that's caused this change, you

can tell me. I'll listen." Mizuto thrust his index finger at me in my confused state, making my heart skip a beat yet again. "After all, I recently read in a book that little sisters always rely on their big brothers."

I couldn't help but laugh after being so taken aback by the angry tone he took with me. "Where'd you read that? A light novel? Brother lovers are a dime a dozen in those."

"Yeah, and they're just like you."

Oh, I see. I'm the little sister right now...and one of those "dime a dozen" brother lovers. "I suppose...I don't have a choice."

Oddly enough, I didn't fight back. For some reason, I started to think that it'd be best if I just came clean about the feelings I'd been carrying.

"But before that," I added, "I have one condition."

"A condition? You're being kinda cheeky for a little sister."

"Change." I turned away from him, removing him from my field of view. "I can't stay calm when you're dressed like that."

"Are you done?"

"Yeah, come in."

I stepped into Mizuto's room after he'd finished changing. His shelves were overflowing with books, and what books didn't fit on them were scattered across the floor in messy piles. His room was a very good representation of his life—knee-deep in books for sixteen straight years.

But among all the standard novels were some with flashy covers and fancy illustrations inside of them. I wasn't familiar with these series, but I knew that *Higashira-san* was. Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain in my chest. I couldn't ignore these thorny feelings that were piercing my heart.

Mizuto sat on the edge of his bed. Of course, even now, I didn't feel like sitting next to him. So, instead, I pulled out the chair at his desk, and sat there facing away from him, staring at the mess on his desk. *Maybe I should clean this later...*

"So..." I started before pausing for a second and adding, "Onii-chan."

"Speak your mind, little sis."

I'm the little sister right now, and he's the older brother. It was only natural that I could selfishly consult with him like this. "I'm jealous of Higashira-san," I blurted out clearly and succinctly.

Mizuto just sat there in silence listening to me.

"I kept thinking about how the entire time we were dating, I couldn't call you by your first name, but then *this* girl could do it almost immediately without batting an eye. It didn't sit right with me.

But then I started thinking about how I didn't have any right to be jealous..." *Which is why I stopped being jealous. It felt like a weight had been lifted from me—I felt so free. But that was most likely because...* "Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"I'm not getting on your nerves, nor am I shooting you any biting or sarcastic remarks right now, right? What, exactly, is it that you don't like about that?"

"No clue. Although, if I had to guess..." Then, in a low voice that I could barely hear, he said, "I don't like how you're acting like everything we went through together never happened...or something."

Oh... I get it. You're the exact opposite of me. You can actually put into words the intangible feelings you're experiencing. The freedom I'd felt was the same as if I'd discarded all my worldly belongings to live a minimalist life. I'd thrown away everything important to me just to feel a moment's relief. More than likely, the relief would have turned to regret not too far down the road...and he'd realized this before it came to that.

"Hey, Onii-chan?" I asked in a joking tone, attempting to mask my embarrassment. "Hypothetically, even if they aren't dating, siblings can... They can get jealous, right?"

"No. A little sister that gets jealous of her older brother for having a female friend is gross."

"Hey!" I shouted in a panic after having the metaphorical rug pulled out from under me.

"Don't worry. I've known how gross you are for two whole years," he said through a gentle grimace.

I opened my mouth to say something, but shut it again after realizing I had no words. I turned my head away from him and focused my gaze back on the top of his desk.

Then, I finally squeezed out what I'd wanted to say in a whisper. "You're the gross one, Onii-chan."

"Spoken like a true little sister."

Mizuto

It was now one day after I'd endured all sorts of abusive language from my little stepsister who'd incorrectly learned that a little sister is supposed to verbally abuse her older brother. I sat in the school library with Higashira, letting her know the results of the advice she had kinda sorta given me the day before.

My past relationship with Yume though was, of course, *not* one of the things I talked about, but after quietly nodding along to my verbal report, Higashira said, "So, what prize will you be submitting this story for?"

“This isn’t a book I wrote!”

“I-It cannot be!” she said, covering her mouth in shock.

For as facially expressionless as she is, she’s good at being expressive with the rest of her body.

“The little stepsister who is a lover of brothers is not just a myth, it seems.”

“Well, they aren’t on Wikipedia.”

“Your story has truly touched my heart. I wish for your eternal happiness.”

“Thanks...” *Not exactly a good feeling, being wished well after everything that happened...*

“Although, I must say... She was jealous of me? Life is certainly rife with mysteries, is it not?”

“Don’t say it like it’s some kind of unexplainable science phenomenon. She’s looking down on me. In her mind, the only person who’d ever want to possibly hang out with me was her, so she was surprised when she saw you pop up out of nowhere. Pretty rude, don’t you think?”

“I see. I am quite sure that I’d get jealous if you suddenly had another friend, myself.”

Huh? Oh wait, now that I think about it, she doesn’t know about Kawanami, does she? Well, he’s just a self-proclaimed friend in the first place. I don’t really care. But it got me thinking. When I became acquainted with Kawanami, Yume kicked my chair, and her anger kinda ended with that. In Higashira’s case, though, the reaction was a lot more extreme.

I understood her feelings about Higashira calling me by my first name, but what about Minami-san? *She’s been calling Yume by her first name, hasn’t she? Where’s her logic?! I don’t understand at all!* What was the difference between Higashira and Kawanami in her mind?

After I reported the results to Higashira, we went back to reading, and later left the school together after the last bell had rung. On our way out, we were ambushed by an unexpected duo.

“Oh, there they are! Yume-chan, they’re here!”

Right at the school gates waiting for us were two girls—Akatsuki Minami and Yume Irido. Higashira immediately vanished behind me, hiding like a squirrel from a predator.

“Heya Irido-kun and...Higashira-san, right? We’ve been waiting!” Minami-san called out while waving at us.

“Waiting? For us? Why?” I asked, tilting my head in confusion as we approached them.

“Hm, I dunno. We were just hangin’ out nearby when Yume-chan said she wanted to catch you two on your way home.”

Yume, who was leaning on the pillar by the gate, made quick eye

contact with me and then walked towards us, her long black hair swaying with every step she took.

Then, she smiled and spoke, not to me, but to the person hiding behind me, Higashira. "Hello, Higashira-san." Her tone was very firm as she peered around me to look right at Higashira. "Thank you for being friends with Mizuto. I'm his older stepsister, Yume Irido. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The atmosphere suddenly tensed up. Behind her wide smile was an obvious animosity that didn't show with her usual people-pleasing self. *Is she really that angry about Higashira calling me by my first name?! It's like having to walk on eggshells around her, but the eggshells are actually landmines! I need to find a way to jump back two years and change history!*

While I was frozen stiff with fear, Minami-san covertly pulled out her phone and showed me its screen. A memo app was open, and written was: "*What'd you do, you bastard?*"

I slid my finger across the screen and wrote back: "*Secret.*" The next moment, there was a thud, which came from Minami-san thrusting her phone into my stomach. *D-Do you seriously want to marry me, you crazy girl?!*

While Minami-san and I had our own little back and forth, Yume extended her hand to Higashira, looking for a handshake. But who in their right mind would give her their hand? She looked like she was completely prepared to squeeze it to a pulp! A sense of nervousness ran between Minami-san and me.

Higashira blinked at Yume, cautiously looking from her outstretched hand to her face. As someone who had little experience with other people, it was only natural that in the face of this animosity, she said... "Oh, I see. It is a pleasure to meet you as well," and shook her hand like nothing was wrong.

My eyes, Minami-san's eyes, and Yume's eyes all widened with surprise. Sensing that we were acting weird, Higashira nervously looked at us, confused.

"U-Um, d-did I do something peculiar? I-I apologize! I-I have always been told that I am incapable of reading the room!"

"Um, Higashira-san? Mind if I ask you somethin'?" Seeing Higashira tense up, Minami-san chose her words carefully. "What is Irido-kun to you?"

"Huh? A friend who shares in my hobbies and interests," she answered without hesitation.

"Oh, huh... Hm, I see... Interesting..." Yume reacted the most to Higashira's answer. Her eyes darted around like she was trying to find allies, before looking down at the hand she'd used to shake with. Her face turned red. "S-Sorry! L-Let's start over. It's a pleasure to meet

you!”

“Huh? O-Oh, all right.” Higashira tilted her head in confusion as Yume firmly gripped her hand with both of hers.

Ah, now I get why she reacted so strongly to Higashira. Just as I came to this understanding, Minami-san shot me a really annoying sneer and whispered, “No romantic feelings at all. Luh-mao!”

I had no idea what was so funny to her. *Do you see me as your enemy or as a love interest? Can you clear things up already?!* She made it sound like I was trying to woo Higashira or something.

“U-Um, Mizuto-kun? Would you kindly explain to me what is going on here? I-I am not nearly socially equipped enough to decipher this situation.”

“All right, fine.”

“H-Huh?! You’re gonna explain everything?! W-Wai—” My little stepsister’s face went pale.

“This girl here was convinced that you were into me,” I said, pointing at Yume.

“Noo! Stooo—”

Oh, shut up. I shoved my bag in her face.

“Yeah, even though I explained to her that we’re just friends, she didn’t believe me one bit, and that’s what led to this stunt. She wanted to impress on you that you have no claim to me. That’s why she called me by my first name, like you do.”

“You’re so evil, Irido-kun.” Minami-san had a very disapproving expression on her face, but she didn’t know Higashira like I did. If I didn’t explain things like this, she wouldn’t understand.

Her face bright red, Yume started cowering. *Hmph. This is your just deserts for trying something so cowardly, which ultimately backfired on you.*

Higashira tilted her head side to side trying to digest what I’d said. “She thought... I was ‘into’ you...? Huh?”

“I-I’m not at fault here! You two walk home together every single day! I’m not weird for thinking that!”

“Just to back up Yume-chan here, she’s right. Anybody would think that! Even *I* thought that!” Minami-san said, covering for Yume.

In response, Higashira just contorted her face in confusion.

“Mizuto-kun, I believe this is the second time in my life that I wish I had been born male. For your information, the first time was when I began menstruating. I want to be reincarnated into a body that does not leak blood from its nether regions.”

“Hear that, you two? Would a girl say that to a guy she likes?”

Both Yume and Minami-san fell into silence, looked at each other, and after some deep thought, they both bowed their heads to Higashira and said, “Sorry for assuming the wrong things about you!”

“Huh? Why do I feel like you two are distancing yourselves while you apologize? M-Mizuto-kun, are they creeped out by me? Did I say something upsetting?!”

“Yeah, they’re creeped out, and they’re not alone,” I said, moving away from her too.

“S-Sorry!!! Please do not cast me aside!”

As tears started to form in Higashira’s eyes, I patted her head to comfort her. Since I was her only friend, I felt very responsible for her. It was kinda like having a big dog that had grown fond of you. As I patted her head, Yume and Minami-san just looked on in confusion.

“Yume-chan, relationships are hard, huh?”

“Yes, this might be a little too difficult.”

Yume

“Mizuto-kun, tell me, who do you prefer between Nera and Bianca?”

“They’re from Dragon Quest 5, right? First of all, I’ve never played it.”

“Allow me to provide a quick explanation. If Nera does not marry the Hero, she marries her childhood friend. On the other hand, if Bianca does not marry the Hero, she lives out the rest of her years alone, in a remote mountain village.”

“Okay, then I pick Nera.”

“Pardon?! Why would you *not* choose Bianca? She has so much to offer!”

“Yeah, a lot of emotional baggage!”

I watched as Mizuto and Higashira-san walked in front of me, intimately talking to each other. The comment she’d blurted out to Mizuto back at the school gate was certainly not something she’d say to someone she liked. To a friend of the same sex, maybe. I’d never say anything vulgar like that to any of *my* friends unprompted, though. Only in a situation where someone else said it first and I was just parroting them.

If this was how they normally acted with each other, then I could accept that neither of them held any kind of romantic feelings towards the other. Higashira-san had a little bit of a similar vibe to mine in middle school, so I had jumped to conclusions, but I didn’t know the half of what she truly was like. *But seriously, aren’t they...?*

“They’re really chummy. It’s hard to believe they just met a few days ago,” Akatsuki-san said from beside me as if she’d read my mind. “It’d be crazy to just take their word that they’re not dating. Right, Yume-chan?”

“Seriously...”

Other people would’ve thought the exact same thing as I had. I

hadn't thought they were dating because I'm possessive of the guy I'd broken up with and still have some kind of feelings for—no, *anyone* would have thought that!

I looked back at the two of them walking in front of me. They were so close to each other that their shoulders were practically touching, and their fun conversation didn't seem to be running out of gas any time soon, especially with the way they were giggling. *Was there a time when we looked that intimate with each other?*

"I'm so disappointed. If Higashira-san had feelings for him, I was thinking of helping her out."

"Huh? Helping her?"

"Well, look at her. She's not exactly the assertive type. She'd need a little push, otherwise they'd just stay friends forever. Also, it'd be pretty convenient for me if they got together." Minami shot me a strangely malicious smile. "Plus, if you joined in, she'd be invincible! You might be siblings, but you could find out all sorts of information that'd help her win his heart."

"I guess..." *I doubt there's anyone in this world more knowledgeable about how to steal his heart than me.* "But this is all assuming that she's actually interested in him, right?"

"Yeah. So disappointing! I totally thought they were a good match."

A good match? I looked up at them again. Seeing them made me really think from the bottom of my heart that it'd be so wonderful if they started dating.

"Oh, this is my destination." Higashira-san came to a stop at the crosswalk.

"Right. See you tomorrow."

"A-Also..." Higashira-san glanced at me, but instead of continuing what she was going to say, she started to fidget.

Just as we tilted our heads in confusion, Mizuto gently tapped her on the back.

"U-Uh," Higashira-san deeply bowed her head at us and then, in a hoarse voice, she said, "G-Goodbye!" Then she let out a breath of relief as she raised her head. "I-I said it."

"Good job," Mizuto said, smiling.

"Heh heh." Higashira-san smiled back at him, slightly embarrassed.



This was the same Higashira-san whose face barely moved to make expressions. But she now wore a smile, her face tinged red by the setting sun.

“Hm?”

“Hmmm?!”

Wait. Wait what just happened?

“Okay, goodbye to you too, Mizuto-kun! Please, contact me on LINE when you’ve finished reading the book I recommended!”

“Yeah, as long as you’re still awake around two.”

“Roger that!”

At that very second, the crosswalk sign lit up, and Higashira-san elatedly skipped to the other side of the street. As we watched her disappear behind the cars, Akatsuki-san said in an even lower voice than usual, “Do you remember what you said, Yume-chan?”

“Huh?”

“You said you’d help if she’s interested in him, right?”

“Wha— I-I didn’t promise or anything!”

“Irido-kun, gimme Higashira-san’s LINE ID.”

“I told you I didn’t promise anything!”

Isana Higashira Does Not Know What Love Is

I'm sure this is obvious, but before two people enter a relationship, there's a certain event that has to happen first to kick the entire thing off—a confession. In our case, I was the one who confessed to him. Isn't it unfair that the other person doesn't have to confess?! My feelings about that aside, there was no way that he would ever confess to anyone, so it had to be me.

My method of confession? A love letter. Of course, I chose this not because I was too shy to tell him to his face—I just didn't have a good time to do so. We'd met up every day during summer break, but once school started again, there was a good chance that we wouldn't be able to keep hanging out as we had been. Taking that into account, I panicked and stayed up all night writing him a letter on the last day of summer break.

Anyone who read it would've realized that I'd scrambled to write it in the middle of the night. Plus, since I fell asleep while writing it, I didn't have time to prepare the most important thing—my heart.

When you send a love letter, you don't put it in the mail. You put it in the person's shoe cubby; that's just how it is. So, I'd planned to do just that as I wrote the letter, but my middle school self had a tendency to be cowardly and ditzy, so of course things didn't go as planned. All I had to do was put it in his shoe cubby, but I freaked out, and started thinking that it'd be better to think it over a little more. Just as I was absorbed in my thoughts, *he* appeared.

“Morning, Ayai.”

“G-Good morning, Irido-kun.”

The person I was going to give the letter to appeared before me and put his shoes on. We walked together to the school library, and I was in full panic mode every step of the way. *What should I do? Should I give it to him tomorrow? No. School starts tomorrow. I'm not going to get a second chance if I don't do it today!*

It would've been nice if I weren't so indecisive, but a coward like me wouldn't be able to make a decision no matter how desperate the situation. So in reality, I didn't do anything until the very last second.

“I-Irido-kun! P-Please read this...”

To review, the reason I gave him something as outdated as a love letter was because I didn't have the courage to confess to him directly.

Despite that, I was directly giving him a love letter, and now he was reading that very same love letter that had been written in the heat of the moment right in front of me. *What kind of fetish would I need to be okay with this?!*

Regret filled my head as I watched him read the letter in silence. I was so filled with self-hatred that I felt like I was going to throw up, and to make things worse, my stomach hurt too. It felt like my entrails could've been blown out of my you-know-what.

After a while, he finished reading the letter, and called out to me as I just stood there shaking while staring at the floor. "I think I've grown closer to you than anyone else I've ever met."

I hadn't been expecting that. I lifted my head.

"And I think I talk and laugh with you more than anyone other than my dad."

Then I began thinking this was where everything would conveniently fall together and the result I wanted would be right in my grasp. But I quickly snapped out of it. After all, there had never been a single time that what I wanted came to fruition. In fact, nothing had *ever* gone right for me. My life was just a series of failures. There wasn't anything that I'd tried doing that had had any kind of tangible results. So I decided it was better to just resign myself to that fact. But my thoughts were interrupted by Irido-kun.

"Thank you for falling for someone like me. I look forward to our...relationship."

Wait. What? What?! My brain couldn't follow what was happening. Surely, I thought, my ears weren't functioning correctly. I tried replaying his words in my head over and over again, because it must've been a mistake. I must've been dreaming.

But when I looked up at him, I saw the face of the person I liked, but he was making an expression I'd never seen before. It was so gentle, but also tinged with embarrassment. *Maybe, just maybe...*

Just as I tried replaying his words in my head again, Irido-kun opened his mouth again. "Will you be my girlfriend, Ayai?" he asked in a clear voice.

It was as if he had read my mind. I started crying, not because I was scared, sad, or because I'd read a book. This was the first time that I was crying out of joy.

Thus, in what could only be described as a folly of youth, I got a so-called boyfriend the day before the second semester of the eighth grade started.

The next morning, Higashira-san found a threatening letter in her shoe cubby that read: *I know your secret. Come to the designated place alone after school if you don't want it to get out.*

My little stepbrother was very cautious and guarded, so he didn't end up telling me or Akatsuki-san Higashira-san's LINE ID... Which I thought was very wise of him. So now, here we were after school at said "designated place"—the same family restaurant we'd gone to during our sleepover.

"Are you sure about this?" I asked, glancing at the entrance while pouring myself a cup of black tea at the drink bar.

"Chill, there's nothin' to worry about! Higashira-san's gonna show up with tears in her eyes."

"*That's* what I'm worried about!"

"Chill, chill." Akatsuki-san shrugged off my doubts as she poured herself some melon soda.

How could she be so calm after blackmailing someone?! I couldn't help but feel a little bit scared of her.

We stayed posted by the drink bar for a little longer before finally, *she* showed up. A girl with a short bob cut, huge chest, and poor posture cautiously walked in and nervously looked around.

As she did, a hostess walked towards her. "Table for one?"

"U-Uh, u-um..." Higashira-san sputtered.

At that moment, Akatsuki-san jumped up, approached Higashira-san, and tapped her on the shoulder. "Ah, there you are! C'mon, over here!"

"Huh?!" Higashira-san blinked in confusion as Akatsuki-san pulled her towards the table I'd secured in the meantime.

She looked like she had absolutely no clue what was going on as she was dragged along.

When she noticed me, she said, "Oh, the brother-loving younger stepsister..."

"I *really* don't like how you've remembered me in your head!"

"Wait, did you forget me?!" Akatsuki-san huffed.

"Eek! I-I apologize!"

I couldn't hide how shocked I was that she completely brushed past my once-in-a-lifetime self-introduction that teemed with malice and instead honed in on something completely different. Akatsuki-san was also very shocked since she herself wasn't easily forgotten—especially not after just one day.

In my opinion, it made sense. I related, thanks to my own experience back in middle school. Since Higashira-san wasn't the type of person who made eye contact, it wasn't surprising at all that she was bad at remembering faces.

Akatsuki-san motioned for Higashira-san to sit on the other side of the table, and then sat down next to me. Two versus one.

"U-Um..." Higashira-san shot us a nervous glance, still unaware what was going on.

We weren't going to be able to talk like this, so I decided to play good cop.

"Sorry, Higashira-san. The letter in your shoebox was just a silly prank by Akatsuki-san. There's nothing to be scared of."

"A-A prank? Are you certain this is not an extortion scheme?"

"It's not! We'll even pay for your drink bar! How about that?"

Technically, since we were the ones who'd coerced her into being here, paying for her was the least we could do. Akatsuki-san seemed to disagree with my explanation, though, because she was frowning and grumbling.

"This wasn't *just* a silly prank, Yume-chan. We really do know your secret, Higashira-san," she said with a smug smile.

It was so convincing. It was such a believable smile that Higashira-san started to tremble in fear. *Oh, come on!* For the time being, I decided that it would be best to have her drink something and calm down, so the three of us went to the drink bar.

"Do you know how to work the drink bar, Higashira-san?"

"Uh, yes. I dine at family restaurants whenever my mother cannot be bothered to prepare dinner."

I couldn't help but compare her mother to mine, who insisted on making meals all the time. *What a flexible mom she has.* When we returned to our seats, the apparently thirsty Higashira-san practically chugged her orange juice. Akatsuki-san waited until she finished her glass before firing her next shot.

"So, Higashira-san, what secret do you think we're talking about?"

"Hm? My secret?" She was much calmer than before and simply tilted her head. "Oh, perhaps, is it that I purchased a dojin of pornographic nature from a certain vendor?"

"Um, no. That's more of a *guy* kind of secret."

"Oh no, did you possibly discover the VOD of the test stream I did on my VTuber channel in middle school? I'm almost certain I deleted that immediately..."

"No frickin' way! *What?!* That's even more of a secret than what we're talking about!"

"S-So that was the wrong secret... Did I just reveal one of my darkest secrets unprompted?!" Higashira-san dropped her face to the table, but her ears were so red that she obviously felt humiliated. *So cute, yet so pitiful...*

Akatsuki-san must've felt bad, because instead of making Higashira-san guess, she told her straight out. "I'm talking about Mizuto-kun."

"Pardon?" Higashira-san asked, raising her head. "What about Mizuto-kun?"

"Well, you like him, don't you?"

“Hm? Well, yes, I do.”

“Wait, what?” She admitted it so easily that Akatsuki-san was completely caught off guard.

To me, it was clear that they weren’t talking about the same thing. A misunderstanding was brewing.

“Higashira-san, by ‘like,’ Akatsuki-san meant it romantically. Do you understand?”

“Romantically? As in, romantic comedy?”

Can she only register things in relation to light novel genres?! Either way, it didn’t seem to click for her just yet because she continued to tilt her head from side to side, mulling over what I’d said.

“You’re wondering if I *like* Mizuto-kun... Hm, I truly apologize, but I believe there’s been a mistake. You both seem to be operating under a misunderstanding.”

“No. No mistake. *You’re* the one operating under a misunderstanding! Yume-chan, bust it out.” Akatsuki-san snapped her fingers, and I pulled out my phone.

“Are we really doing this?” I grimaced.

“Why did you take the picture if you’re not gonna show her?”

“Yeah, but...”

I pulled up the picture I’d practically risked my life to take on Akatsuki-san’s orders. I went through so much trouble to get this that it felt like a waste to just *show* her. But I didn’t really have a choice. After all, if I didn’t show the picture to Higashira-san, then it’d be like I just took this picture for my own personal use.

“I’ll take that!”

“Ah—”

While I was being indecisive, Akatsuki-san swiped my phone from me in one swift motion.

“Now then, Higashira-san, can you really deny your feelings after seeing...*this*?!”

“I am not sure what you’re insinuating, but Mizuto-kun and I are only friend—”

“Ta-da! It’s Irido-kun’s sleeping face!”

The moment she saw it, Higashira-san froze in place and held her breath. Her gaze was fixed on the picture I secretly took last night. *It was a real struggle to get that shot because he goes to bed so late...*

“S-S-So...”

“Yeah, Irido-kun’s real cute when he’s sleeping, isn’t he, Higashira-san?”

In response, Higashira-san rapidly nodded. Akatsuki-san gave me a smirk, and I narrowed my eyes at her. Eventually, it seemed that Higashira-san had caught on to how she was presenting herself in front of us, so she covered her mouth and finally tore her eyes away

from my phone.

"I-I have absolutely no interest in that picture. M-Mizuto-kun is my friend! I-I would never look at him in an impure way!"

"By the way, this is only a screenshot. There's a whole video of this."

"Hm?!"

"In the video, you can actually hear him breathing, right, Yume-chan?"

"You were the one who told me to make sure I got that..."

I didn't do it because I wanted to! I was ordered to!

"If you'd just come clean, this video could be all yours. I bet it'll feel like he's right there with you if you listen to it at bedtime."

Higashira-san once again buried her head into the table and groaned like she'd taken internal damage. Then, I began thinking about what Akatsuki-san had just said. *"Like he's right there with you"...* Wait, huh?! What the heck was I just thinking?! I told myself I'd delete that video! It's served its purpose!

"You're so stubborn. Why won't you just admit it?" Akatsuki-san sighed while looking down at Higashira-san writhing around in pain.

"Isn't it normal to fall for guys you vibe with? We're not blaming you or anything. Yume-chan might be a *slight* brother lover, but I don't think she'd ever come out and *directly* confront anyone who's got a crush on her brother."

"So you're saying I would do it indirectly?! Also, I'm not a brother lover!"

"Mmhmm. Sure."

That was such a half-assed response! I can't believe this! Just as I was thinking that, Higashira-san let out a whisper.

"Really?"

"Huh?"

Higashira-san slowly raised her head and looked at both of us.

"Do I really like Mizuto-kun that way?" she asked nervously.

"Huh?!" Both of us reflexively exclaimed, which only made Higashira-san recoil and shrink in fear.

She couldn't really be *that* dense, could she? Both of us were completely dumbfounded by her obliviousness.

"Wait, so, um... You aren't kidding? You're, like, for real right now?!" Akatsuki-san asked, bewildered.

"Wh-Why would I lie? I truly haven't the faintest idea if I'm interested in him that way or not! I've absolutely no experience in that regard..."

"N-No way! *He's* your first love?! How old are you, again?!"

Higashira-san hung her head and let out a pitiful wail while trying to hide behind her bangs. Seeing someone this pure made me feel

really uncomfortable.

“Wh-What should we do, Akatsuki-san?”

“What a coincidence. I was just about to ask you the same thing, Yume-chan.”

“First love.” How nostalgic. Not to mention being unsure whether or not the feelings were actually love. *Can I get a break? I’ve been trying to move past my embarrassing history, and yet here I am being confronted by it again.* I wanted to scream. I wanted to get up and run away. Had I been this embarrassing back then?!

“Hm, okay, then think about this,” Akatsuki-san said hesitantly.

“You and Irido-kun are just happily chatting with each other, when out of nowhere, he hugs you.”

Higashira-san jumped a little and let out a small yelp.

“And then he whispers in your ear in a very low voice, ‘Sorry, would it be okay if we’re not *just* friends for a little?’”

This time *I* let out a yelp of surprise and buried my face into the table.

“While you’re at a loss for words, Irido-kun leans in and forcefully presses his lips— Wait, why are *you* hiding, Yume-chan?!”

I-Ignore me! My brain’s just...malfunctioning. Akatsuki-san’s voice just happened to have the same kind of tone.

“Well, at any rate—” Suddenly, there was the sound of a shutter, and in the next moment, Akatsuki-san was shoving a picture of Higashira-san into her own face. “This *definitely* looks like love.”

Higashira-san stared at her moist-eyed, pursed-lipped, red-faced self.

“Th-This is me?!” she asked, her body shaking.

“Yep.”

“I-I greatly resemble a harlot!”

“Yes. Yes, you do.”

Higashira-san blushed for a different reason this time, and then her face once again met the tabletop.

“The entire time I thought I was growing closer to Mizuto-kun as a friend, I’ve been looking at him like a sexually excited sow... I-I have become a succubus. My actions are nothing short of those of a succubus!”

“Let’s back up a little. If it was that easy to be labeled as a succubus, most of the women in the world would be demon queens...” I retorted in a low voice that she apparently didn’t hear; she was too busy being distracted by her first-love revelation. *Wow, this is so bittersweet. I feel like throwing up.*

“Finally! We can get to the topic at hand.” Akatsuki-san gulped down the remainder of her practically flat melon soda and then let out a burp.

Gross.

“What would that be, exactly?” Higashira-san asked cautiously.

“Well, it’s your lucky day, Higashira-san! Me and Yume-chan are gonna help you go out with Irido-kun!” Akatsuki-san said with a big smile.

“Huh?!” Higashira-san blinked in confusion as Akatsuki-san struck her chest with confidence.

Wait, did she say “me and Yume-chan”?

“Um, Akatsuki-san... I know that we’ve come this far, but I never promised I’d help.”

“What? But if you help, it’ll be so easy to figure out what Irido-kun likes. You’d feel better with Yume-chan in your corner, wouldn’t you, Higashira-san?”

“U-Uh? W-Well, I...”

“I don’t wanna toot my own horn, but people come to me for relationship advice aaall the time. I bet I can help you a lot too!”

Now that she’d mentioned it, I remembered that she was the type of person that people would confide in. It was plain to see that she had relationship experience—look at the way she talked. Plus, whenever she turned down offers to hang out, people would naturally assume that she was secretly meeting with a guy.

“So, whaddya say, Higashira-san? Why don’tcha team up with me and Yume-chan? It’ll be a cinch to get Irido-kun with our help!”

Um, I still haven’t said anything about helping? However, I didn’t really have a reason to say no either. If I did, that’d only support Higashira-san’s theory that I was a brother lover. But still...

“N-No thank you,” Higashira-san said in a soft, gentle voice. “I truly do like Mizuto-kun as a friend, and I am plenty happy just being able to converse with him. Besides, I believe pursuing anything more than friendship would result in pain. It would be nothing but a waste of effort. I truly apologize after you went through all this effort for me, but I must decline.” As she spoke, I could feel her shrinking with each word that left her mouth.

A feeling of *déjà vu* washed over me. Once, I had been like her—without confidence and convinced that I was unable to do anything right. Because of that, I avoided doing anything altogether. I told myself that doing nothing was the best course of action and that I could be content with maintaining the status quo, even if I wasn’t.

“Don’t give up before you’ve even tried.” Before I knew it, these words had slipped out of my mouth.

Both Higashira-san and Akatsuki-san looked at me in surprise, but I couldn’t stop the words from pouring out.

“If you’re going to give up in the end anyway, then do everything you can before you do. You want this, don’t you? You want to become

his girlfriend! You don't want to *just* be friends anymore!" I stood up, bent over and lifted Higashira-san's face up. "You can do it. You can become his girlfriend! You can walk to school together holding hands every day, you can kiss each other goodbye, and you can flirt with each other over the phone before bed! You can go on dates, you can give each other Christmas presents, and you can take care of each other when one of you gets sick! Look, all of that can be the norm if you become his girlfriend!"

I could tell that Higashira-san was envisioning everything that I'd said. She was thinking about how happy she'd be if she could do that, how blessed she'd be. She thought about it, fantasized about it, and then simulated it in her head over and over again.

"Can you really think about all of that and say that you're okay not being his girlfriend?"

Her eyes watered. If she didn't say anything, that would have been enough of an answer for me. But Higashira-san's head drooped even further. She gripped her skirt and, in a soft voice, said, "I want to do all of that..." She finally said what she was feeling. "I want to flirt with him, and I want him to tell me he likes me! I no longer wish to just be *friends* with Mizuto-kun anymore!" Then, when she raised her head, I noticed a strong will to fight in her eyes. "How should I proceed? How do I become Mizuto-kun's girlfriend?!" Higashira-san stood up and leaned over, grabbing my hands. "Please tell me, Sensei!"

Say *what*? I snapped back to my usual self. I had unintentionally snapped and flown off the leash. *Wait, am I...okay with this?*

"Hell yeah!" Akatsuki-san clenched her fist in victory next to me.

(8:14) Izanami: Mizuto only perceives me as a friend.

It was now nighttime, and Higashira-san was enthusiastically asking us for help with her budding romance. As I sat in my room, I stared at our LINE group called "Mizuto Irido Conquest Conference," which the three of us had made in order to make planning our strategy as smooth as possible. And the message to start off the entire conversation was Higashira-san's griping. But before that...why was her username that of a god?

(8:14) Izanami: I am confident that confessing to him now would lead to failure. It's terrifying.

(8:15) Akatsuki☆: nah, im sure youd be fine. guys are always paying attention to girls, and I'm sure he's noticed your rockin' bod lol

(8:16) Izanami: If nothing else, I am very confident in my breasts!

(8:16) Akatsuki☆: im hella jelly. got any to spare?
lol

Akatsuki-san sent a melon sticker.

(8:17) Izanami: I think my size is more that of watermelons.

(8:18) Yume: Why are you so braggy when it comes to your breasts? I thought you were shy!

(8:18) Izanami: In reality, I get very stiff shoulders, and there are fewer cute bras to select from.

(8:18) Akatsuki☆: you cant brag and complain at the same time, this is bullshit

I chuckled after Akatsuki-san sent several kitchen knife stickers in a row. Higashira-san's breasts were probably impressive no matter who you asked. They were definitely big enough that guys especially would do a double take. Was it even possible to completely ignore them when they're right next to you?

(8:20) Izanami: Though I may be well-endowed, I don't believe it will aid me in my conquest of Mizuto-kun. I have never felt his gaze upon them. I suppose that's good, in a sense.

(8:21) Akatsuki☆: yeah i guess irido-kun isnt the type to thirst over girls... yume-sensei, what do u think?

(8:21) Yume: I think you should stop calling me Sensei.

(8:22) Yume: He acts like he's not interested, but I can assure you that he is.

(8:23) Izanami: Has Mizuto-kun ever looked at you with indecent eyes, Sensei?

"Huh?!" I bolted up in bed.

What is she asking?! Who in their right mind would ask that question?! Will she get angry if I say yes? I need to pick my words very carefully.

(8:25) Yume: Higashira-san, do you really want to know? Won't you get jealous?

(8:25) Izanami: I am not the type of person who feels envy.

Oh, I'm so jealous. If I were like that, then maybe we would have dated for longer.

(8:26) Izanami: Has Mizuto-kun ever looked at you with indecent eyes, Sensei?

This girl really just copied and pasted her question. *How badly does she want to know?!* I hesitated at first, but after being egged on like that, I decided I needed to be honest.

(8:27) Yume: Well, he's seen me coming out of the bath before... I guess.

(8:27) Izanami: What are Mizuto-kun's fetishes?

(8:28) Yume: Drop it! How would I know?!

I think he has a thing for ears. He gently bites them when he wants to kiss.

(8:29) Akatsuki☆: we gotta watch him and find out

(8:29) Izanami: What do you mean by "watch"?

(8:30) Akatsuki☆: we'll watch u guys when ur together and see if hes checkin u out

(8:30) Yume: It's a safe opening move.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't interested in how they spent their time together. *Ahem, no, this is all for her sake. Nothing else.*

(8:31) Izanami: What should I do if he is stealing glances at my breasts after all?

(8:32) Yume: I will punish him by giving him the nickname: "the booblien"

(8:32) Akatsuki☆: ooh sick! ill call him that too

(8:33) Izanami: Then I will join you two in doing so.

(8:33) Akatsuki☆: wait no not you lol. thats a bad idea

Just like that, we set our plan into motion the next day after school, mixing in with the students studying in the library. Akatsuki-san let her hair down, and I tied my hair into pigtails, finishing off my look with the glasses I'd used in middle school.

“O-Oh my god, Yume-chan. Y-You look so hot in those glasses.”

Akatsuki-san seemed strangely excited and took some pictures, but eventually calmed down. She seriously got way too worked up over something as stupid as glasses. They’re just a tool to correct bad vision. What about them was so appealing? They didn’t make people look cooler or anything...or make you want to save pictures of people wearing them onto your phone. *I’m so sorry, Akatsuki-san, but I don’t understand your feelings at all. Not. One. Bit.*

As Mizuto and Higashira-san sat in their usual corner, we sat in the general reading space of the library. I propped up my phone and turned on the selfie camera. My shoulder was clearly in the frame, but behind it, we could see Higashira-san and Mizuto. Like this, we could easily observe them without directly looking at them. Plus, Akatsuki-san had pointed out that we could zoom in.

“Akatsuki-san, can I ask why you know such a high-level stalking technique?”

“Nope!”

I decided to not press any further, sensing a darkness behind her cheerful smile. She was at her most frightening whenever she acted excessively chipper, so I returned my eyes to the phone screen.

Mizuto was slightly leaning on the edge of the air conditioner while Higashira-san was sitting on top of it, hugging her bare legs. *Is she not going to get in trouble for this? You’re not supposed to sit there.*

“Is Higashira-san doing that unconsciously? If so, then...*wow.*”

“Doing what?”

“Bare legs are apparently kinda a turn-on for guys,” Akatsuki-san explained.

“True. Showing your bare legs is a high-level technique.”

“Then there’s the way she’s sitting. She’s sitting high up like that in *that position*? She’s just asking for her panties to be seen. Then to finish it all off, she’s squishing her big boobs into her knees.”

“Oh, I think I know why she’s doing that. Breasts can get fairly heavy when sitting up and reading, so she’s probably trying to take some of the weight off.”

“Oh, wow. Thanks for sharing. I had *no* idea.”

She may have been smiling, but it certainly didn’t feel like it. *I didn’t know she was so bothered by her figure.* But at any rate, I continued to check on Higashira-san and Mizuto through the camera as they quietly read.

Occasionally, they’d point out a certain part of their respective book to the other person and share a laugh. Seeing them like that overlapped with my memories of him. I wasn’t sure if I felt embarrassed or nostalgic. If the way they were acting with each other reminded me of how we had been when we were dating, though, that

meant that this was not an appropriate distance for two *friends*.

They were close enough that their shoulders touched. If they turned their bodies just barely, they could probably kiss too. They were definitely too close to each other for normal friends. Usually, being that close would force some kind of reaction, but even so...

"Irido-kun really hasn't taken one peek at those boobs despite being so close to them."

"I'm starting to feel bad for Higashira-san."

"Even I can't help but look at them. The entire time we're talking, my eyes are glued to those tits!"

"I think you may be looking a little too much at them."

Although, if I was being honest, I thought this was a good thing. As a girl, it's nice to know that someone isn't ogling you. It's probably part of the reason that someone as closed off as Higashira-san felt so close to him. This was a wonderful display of friendship.

But friendship was not what Higashira-san wanted from him. She wanted him to see her as girlfriend material. The fact that he hadn't so much as peeked at her meant that he might not have any feelings for her. Now that I thought about it, would I have confessed to him if he'd acted like this back then? The only reason a coward like me even ended up going for it was because I could ever so slightly feel that he was checking me out.

"Is he really not into her like that at all?" Akatsuki-san asked, still not believing her eyes. "How? They like the same things, and she's super hot! If I were him, I'd be all over her!"

"I wouldn't say she's *hot* per se, but I know what you mean..."

The situation was pretty much exactly the same as mine. The same kind of meeting, the same kind of interests, and the same kind of environment. So if everything was the same, then why would he date me but only stay friends with Higashira-san? *He must be hiding his feelings.*

He must have gotten better at not showing everything on his face over the course of our relationship. He had to break eventually, and sure enough, after about ten minutes, *something* happened.

Mizuto closed his book and stood up, presumably after finishing it. He then moved to the bookshelf right in front of him, most likely to find a new book.

"Ah." Akatsuki-san made a small gasp.

"What happened?"

"Look at Higashira-san's skirt!"

After Akatsuki-san pointed this out, I realized for the first time that Higashira-san, who'd been sitting on top of the air conditioner, had her bare legs ever so slightly parted, and even we could see her light blue panties.

I frantically tried to send her an urgent LINE message, but I was too late. By the time I started writing the message, Mizuto had already turned around, and of course, he had a full view of the front of Higashira-san, meaning he had a full view of the cloth that was carelessly exposed.

There was no mistake. I saw Mizuto's eyes land right on them. *I-I knew it!* No matter how much of a poker face he had, there was no way that he could ignore Higashira-san, who was a perfect embodiment of his fetish for plain girls. *Ha, I was ri—*

"Higashira, I can see your panties," Mizuto said, his expression not changing one bit as he pointed at her exposed underwear.

Both Akatsuki-san and I let out a whispered scream. Neither of us could make heads or tails out of what he had just done. Higashira-san seemed to be in the same boat, as she made a similar sound of surprise and looked to where Mizuto was pointing.

Her face flushed, and she quickly shifted sitting positions, practically kneeling with both legs flat on the air conditioner. Then, she hurriedly pushed down her skirt and gripped it tightly while dropping her gaze.

"D-Did you see?" Higashira-san asked in a shaky voice.

"Yeah, that's what I said." He tilted his head in confusion.

Does this guy not have a shred of humanity?

"Th-Thank you..." Higashira-san said, her ears now flushed red.

"P-Please excuse me. I need to use the facilities," she said, putting on her shoes.

Akatsuki-san and I exchanged looks and nodded before heading to the nearby bathroom.

The first question that came out of Higashira-san's mouth when she arrived was, "Do you believe he views me as a romantic interest?"

"Nope," both Akatsuki-san and I said at the same time.

I was positive—Mizuto Irido only saw Isana Higashira as a good friend. There was no room for misinterpretation. But why? The situation was almost an exact replica of back then.

"Ha ha ha, I thought as much. Of course he would not take notice of a socially awkward otaku like myself. Ha ha ha..."

"Get a hold of yourself! He might not be into you now, so this romance is pretty much dead in the water, but it's too early to give up!"

"Dead in the water..."

"Akatsuki-san, what are you saying? You're only adding oil to the fire!"

"Ah."

At that moment, Higashira-san seemed unsteady on her feet, so the two of us rushed to support her. As we did, we could hear her

quietly laughing to herself in a very cursed manner. If she was this much in shock, then she must have really liked Mizuto.

“Higashira-san,” I cautiously started as I noticed strength returning to her legs, “as you saw earlier, that guy does not have a single shred of tact. What exactly do you like about him?”

“Oh, right, I wanted to ask that too!”

“Y-You’d like to know what about him catches my fancy?” Higashira-san seemed very confused and unsure, but finally she quietly answered. “H-His voice, perhaps?”

“His voice?” Both Akatsuki-san and I tilted our heads in confusion.

“He is typically a very blunt person, but he can be very kind and considerate. When he is, there is a certain softness to his voice, and when I hear it my mind just goes blank, and I feel like squealing. Heh heh...”

Akatsuki-san and I both recoiled from Higashira-san, whose expression was radiant yet tinged with embarrassment.

“S-So bright!”

“Th-This is the glow of someone in love for the first time, Yume-chan!”

This purity was like poison to me, someone who had experienced the darkness of romance! The fact that she had the same feelings as I did didn’t make it any better either! *I totally get where she’s coming from! He really does sometimes talk in a really soft and gentle voice!*

“We need to get you and Irido-kun together so that you can learn all about how having a boyfriend isn’t all sunshine and rainbows! We need to show you the light so you can gripe about relationships with us!”

“Y-Yes. Thank...you?”

“No, don’t thank her! Just keep staying hopelessly in love!”

You cannot cross over to this side!

“Anyway, the first thing we have to do is make him see you as a girl. I’m still surprised. I didn’t think there was a guy who’d blatantly point at a girl’s panties.”

“I am so sorry for my little brother...”

“Irido-kun feels kinda experienced with girls. Did you help him with that, Yume-chan?”

I jumped a little at Akatsuki-san’s question. *No, she’s not asking about your relationship. She’s asking about living together with him as siblings.*

“U-Uh, maybe...” I tried answering as vaguely as possible.

“Our only option now is to go on the offensive and get touchy-feely with him!” Akatsuki-san’s lips curled into an evil grin.

“T-Touchy-feely?” Higashira-san asked nervously, taking a step backwards.

“Aw, you know what I mean—don’t act all innocent! I’m talking about using these big balloons of pride!” Akatsuki-san swiftly reached out and grabbed Higashira-san’s breasts, rubbing them.

Higashira-san let out a yelp, but I couldn’t help but notice how Akatsuki-san’s fingers were completely disappearing into them.

“You’re gonna casually press these masses of fat into him! There’s no way he won’t become more conscious of you!”

“W-Wai—”

“Whoa! Oh my god!”

“Y-Your finger movements are indecent!”

“Akatsuki-san, stop! We’re entering X-rated territory!”

I pulled Akatsuki-san off of Higashira-san, but she continued to grope the air as if in a trance.

“Y-Yume chan, are all breasts so soft and springy? Can you really mold them like clay? Wait, then what are the things I have on my chest?”

“Stop! Don’t think about it anymore. You won’t last long otherwise.”

“I-I am not sure about your suggestion of me pressing my breasts against him. I-Is that not the type of action taken by indecent women?” Higashira-san asked through labored breaths as she covered her breasts with her arms. She grabbed the sink for support.

“All girls are sluts when they’re trying to get their man!”

“Enemies!” Isana cried. “Mass production of enemies!”

I looked around the bathroom in a panic to make sure no one was around to hear this.

“Well either way, what I meant was more like, you’ll just brush them against him.”

As I feared, Akatsuki-san again reached out to Higashira-san’s breasts, but stopped right before touching them and instead teasingly twirled her fingers in the air.

“He’ll be all like ‘Huh, did they just touch me? Was I imagining it?’ That’s the best possible result. But if you’re too obvious, he might get turned off.”

“Akatsuki-san, where did you learn that from?”

“From myself! I get really excited whenever that happens to me! I might be a girl, but you can’t beat the softness of titties!”

I’m not going to say anything, lest I set her off.

“So yeah, quantity over quality! The more you do this, the more it’ll be fresh in his mind! There are no guys who can forget about the feeling of boobs! Although, there are guys who don’t even realize when they touch them!”

“Can you at least try not to trigger yourself?!”

I was trying to be considerate by not saying anything, and then you

just go and set yourself off anyway! Are you okay?!

“Oops.” Akatsuki-san suddenly brought out her phone and scowled as soon as she saw the screen. “Oh, the jig’s up already?”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a certain extreme Peeping Tom I need to distract.”

Both Higashira-san and I tilted our heads in confusion.

“Well, sorry, but I need to go now! Let’s talk about a more concrete strategy over LINE!” she said, putting her hands together apologetically before running out of the room, leaving the two of us in silence.

Extreme Peeping Tom?

“Chirp... Chirp...”

“Is there a bug in here...?”

New day, same hangout spot. Akatsuki-san and I were observing Higashira-san, who was making cricket noises and sitting next to Mizuto Irido.

Higashira-san’s objective today was none other than to execute “Operation: Titty Touchy-Feely,” the plan that Akatsuki-san had suggested the day before (I had nothing to do with that name). The two of us were here to watch over her. So far, all we’d seen was her nervously fidgeting while her eyes darted around. Finally, it looked like she’d made up her mind; she slyly pressed her body against Mizuto’s.

“M-Mizuto-kun, please take a look at this,” she said, showing the book she was reading to Mizuto.

“Hm? What’s up?” He turned to her, clearly unaware of her secret intentions, to look at the part of the book she was pointing at, but this was all part of the trap that Akatsuki-san had concocted.

Mizuto turned around, and what enveloped his arm was surely a soft, pleasant sensation—Higashira-san’s breasts.

Wow, she really did it. I couldn’t tear my eyes away; I was too impressed. She’d totally pulled off something I couldn’t have ever done. Just parading around in a towel was already pushing it for me. Sure, that may have already been treading dangerously close to “slutty” territory, but still.

“Keep it up, Higashira-san!” Akatsuki-san quietly cheered. “I honestly thought she was gonna say some kinda noncommittal crap like ‘I just want things to stay the same between us’ back then, but look at her now!”

“Weren’t *you* spurring her on?”

“Yep, and I’d do it again! Looks like I don’t need to, though.”

She had a point. If they were already that close, then it was normal to be afraid of losing that close bond by trying to change the

relationship. She might have still been unconfident, but ever since I'd encouraged her, Higashira-san had been trying to overcome that fear.

"Higashira," Mizuto said in a calm voice, making her jump. "Your boobs are touching me."

I shouldn't have been surprised after seeing his reactions the other day, but I still couldn't help but wonder... Was he really *this* heartless?! *How can he be so blunt? Is he just a jaded, stone-cold old man?!*

"Keep going. Just like we practiced!" Akatsuki-san prayed.

Luckily, we'd anticipated this reaction from him, so we'd already brainstormed an appropriate response for her yesterday.

The conversation had gone something like this:

"O-Oh, a-apologies," Higashira-san had said, her face turning red.

"Wait, that's it!" I had said. "Blushing!"

"Mmm, personally, I make it a point to not be friends with fake girls like that," Akatsuki-san had said, adding on to my idea, "but this actually might work for Higashira-san."

Aren't they already friends, though...?

Moving on.

So here we were, in the present, waiting with bated breath for her to bust out the blushing that we'd discussed. Higashira-san quickly pulled away from Mizuto, sheepishly hanging her head before shyly looking up at him.

Perfect! Now, all you have to do is say you're sorry with a blush, and you're golden!

"O-Oh," Higashira-san started. "Yes, they certainly were in contact with you."

"Huh?"

Mizuto was shocked, and Akatsuki-san and I were right there with him. *What the heck was that?!*

"Yes, well, I thought it strange that you seem to have more interest in those less-endowed, so I've taken it upon myself to educate you on the greatness of the *well*-endowed! Go on, then! Indulge in your desire for a motherly figure as you will!"

"Wha— Stop!" Mizuto protested as Higashira-san squished her chest into his back.

Despite these bold actions, this still looked like nothing more than two friends horsing around. But that being said...

"Jeez, Higashira-san..." Akatsuki-san said, exasperated.

No wonder she was so frustrated. After all, with Higashira-san directly behind him, Mizuto had no chance of seeing her bright red face, practically in tears.

"*That's* what you should be showing him!" Akatsuki-san and I cried in unison.





“Good job running away. You’ve successfully managed to keep the friend vibe going.” Akatsuki-san’s words were riddled with sarcasm.

Here we were yet again in the girls’ bathroom near the library. Higashira-san stood dejectedly with her shoulders slumped.

“I-I am not at fault... Was I truly expected to perfectly execute a cute-girl move all of a sudden?”

“How are you supposed to get a boyfriend if you can’t be a cute girl?!” Akatsuki-san snapped back.

“W-Well,” I added, “I understand where Higashira-san is coming from. It’s much easier to not be treated as a girl.”

“Yes! Precisely! It’s much easier that way!” Higashira-san furiously nodded in agreement.

I had been like her once. Being treated like a *girl* was too annoying, so I’d avoided dressing up or following fashion trends. I could tell that over the years, Higashira-san had used the size of her chest as a sort of joke to get by in the world.

“Look, I get it. I really do,” Akatsuki-san said. “But, like, how long are you gonna keep running away? At this rate, you’re never gonna make Irido-kun look your way. At the very least, you need to stop interacting with him like you’re friends.”

“But I *am* friends with Mizuto-kun,” Higashira-san said in a low, declarative voice. “I may be fond of him, but we *are* friends. Is it so wrong for someone to grow fond of their friend? Is it wrong for you to still be friends even after you possess romantic feelings?” Higashira-san didn’t fully raise her head, but she still looked straight into Akatsuki-san’s eyes as she asserted herself.

Higashira-san wanted to enter a romantic relationship with him, but she had no intention of discarding their friendship. What she said might have sounded selfish, but the sincerity in her words was as clear as day. I realized that there was a misunderstanding of sorts between the three of us. Sure, she was pursuing a relationship with him, but she wasn’t looking to change up the way they currently acted with each other. In her mind, dating someone was just an extension of friendship—not the death of it.

But that was not the same thought that Akatsuki-san and I had. Dating someone meant entering a different, more special relationship with them. Friends were something you could have multiple of; a significant other wasn’t.

“Oh, I see... Okay, got it.” Akatsuki-san nodded over and over again, an understanding smile plastered on her face. “Sorry, Higashira-san, I won’t ask you to change how you act anymore. It’s

probably better for you to just be yourself.”

“Y-You think so? I’m relieved to hear that.” She heaved a long sigh, as if a load had been taken off her mind. She must not have been used to asserting her opinion.

“But we’ve gotta do something about your lack of confidence,” Akatsuki-san said, still smiling.

“Huh?”

“You said that it’s easier if he doesn’t treat you like a girl, right? I feel like that’s ’cause you don’t have any confidence acting like one. That’s probably not the only reason, but it’s the biggest, I think.”

“Th-That is almost certainly false...”

“All right then, how about this? Imagine you’re a super pretty girl, like a manga heroine. Would you really not try to use your charms on Irido-kun? Wouldn’t you wanna see him get all red and flustered because he’s conscious of you?”

“Oh... You may have a point.”

She really does.

“If you’re even a little bit more confident in your girliness, I’m positive that Irido-kun’s attitude’ll change too. That being said,” Akatsuki-san continued, a pure smile of enjoyment spreading across her face, “I’m gonna have you transform a bit.”

Akatsuki-san basically dragged Higashira-san all the way to her apartment, and I followed. Before entering, she paused and told us to wait a little. Then, she pressed her ear to Kawanami-kun’s door and listened intently for sounds of any kind.

“Good, he’s out. Come in, you two!”

“You *really* don’t want to run into Kawanami-kun, huh?”

“Duh.”

I was incredibly curious to know what had happened between those two, but Higashira-san came first. Akatsuki-san’s parents weren’t home, just like they hadn’t been when I’d stayed the night. As soon as we entered, Akatsuki-san pulled Higashira-san by the arm to her room and sat her in front of the dresser.

“U-Um, what are you planning to do?”

“This is your transformation scene, Higashira-san!”

“Like a superhero?! A-Am I going to cosplay?”

“All girls cosplay every day of their lives, in a sense. You’re about the only girl I’ve seen that doesn’t do anything to their face. You poor, ignorant girl.”

“I-Ignorant?” The word dealt some damage to her. Perhaps it was something that cut especially deep for otakus? Either way, while Higashira-san spaced out, Akatsuki-san smoothly stuck a comb into her hair.

“O-Oh, a-are you perhaps referring to makeup?! Y-You’re planning to apply some on me?!”

“Finally caught on, huh? It’s important for girls to look cute if they wanna have confidence. The amount of effort you put into your makeup directly correlates to how much confidence you get.”

“N-No, I will pass on the makeup! Th-There is no chance that I will look good with it! It does not suit me!”

“Nonsense! Just chill, Higashira-san. You have a good base to work off of. With just a little work, you could look like a Taiwanese idol!”

“I’d be a completely different person at that point!”

“Yeah, that’s why I specifically said ‘transform.’”

“Superheroes don’t change their faces, though! Aaagh!” Higashira-san cried out as Akatsuki-san happily began applying makeup to her face.

Akatsuki-san moved with purpose. Every stroke and brush of her hand was quick, efficient, and intentional. *Wow.*

“What about you, Yume-chan? You don’t wear all that much makeup, do you?” Akatsuki-san asked me. She was the one doing all the work; I was pretty much just an observer.

“I can’t do anything too difficult, so I keep it simple. I just take care of my eyebrows and skin. If anything, I put the most time into my hair.”

“Ah, makes sense. Your hair’s long, and real pretty too! It looks like such a pain, though! Why do you keep it that long?”

“Well...” I trailed off, knowing I had to tread carefully. If I told the truth, I’d end up spilling everything about my time in middle school. “Maybe part of me wanted to change my image. I wanted to become someone different from who I was before.”

“Oh, I see. So, did you do it? Did you become someone different?”

“I’m not sure.” Though I felt like I might have, I still wasn’t convinced that I’d completely changed.

In the first place, talking to someone like Akatsuki-san was already something I couldn’t have ever done in middle school. But then again, when it came to that guy...

“If you’re hesitating, I bet it worked at least a little! Isn’t that nice, Higashira-san? There’s hope for you!”

“I do not believe that adding some powder and liquid to my face will result in any major differences...”

“You’ve got guts to call my makeup kit ‘powder and liquid.’ Let’s see what you think when you look at yourself...now!” Akatsuki-san pulled up Higashira-san’s head from its slumped position so she could get a good look at herself in the mirror.

“Huh?”

Her long bangs were held up with a hair clip, putting her entire face on full display whether she liked it or not. She continuously blinked in disbelief. Her eyes were doe-like, her nose small and cute, her lips full and moist, and her cheeks round and flushed. She gave off the vibe of an innocent, coquettish lady.

“Wh-Who is this beautiful girl?” Higashira-san asked as she shakily pointed to her reflection.

She could only see her reflection, but we could see her in her entirety. Higashira-san was unmistakably the same beauty as the girl in the mirror.

“Now introducing Isana Higashira-chan! Be nice to her, 'kay?” Akatsuki-san said with a bright grin.

“N-No. Th-This cannot be! This is not me! My appearance has been altered by special effects makeup! Makeup is so scary...” Higashira-san trembled in fear.

“I was watching Akatsuki-san, and the only parts she really touched were your eyebrows and eyelashes. It would have taken much longer if she actually wanted to change what you looked like,” I said, feeling a sense of nostalgia.

“Yep! Oh, I did add a *little* foundation. But yeah, overall I didn't do all that much to your face, Higashira-san.”

In response, she just looked right back at the mirror in disbelief. Who could blame her? She'd probably never given herself a proper look until now.

“I said you had a good base to work off of, remember? That's why all I needed to do was fix up your eyebrows and eyelashes, and then pin your bangs up so that your face was more visible. If anything, Higashira-san...” Akatsuki-san put her hand on Higashira-san's shoulder before continuing. “All I did was draw out your natural cuteness. You've always been a cute girl.”

“I-I'm...cute?” Higashira-san gulped.

That thought had clearly never once crossed her mind. At no point did she ever think that she could be cute... Just like me in middle school.

“Well, if you learn how to do this yourself, I'm sure it'll start to sink in. This amount of makeup is easy to teach you too! I'll even give you some of my spare stuff! So anyway, this is what you're gonna look like when you meet up with him tomorrow.”

“What?! I-I'm going to appear before him like this? Before Mizuto-kun?! No. Absolutely not!” Higashira-san crouched and hid her face.

“You want him to see, don't you?” Akatsuki-san whispered into her ear with a grin.

She was like the devil on Higashira-san's shoulder, and, to her credit, she was very effective. Higashira-san lifted her head once more

and peered at her reflection through her fingers. As she cautiously checked herself out—checked out how cute she'd become—she groaned a little and pursed her lips. Then, she slowly lowered her hands, looked at Akatsuki-san's beaming face, and hugged her.

"Heya, cutie! You're even cuter than light novel heroines!"

"No, I believe light novel heroines are much cuter than me."

"So *that* gets an immediate response, huh..."

Just as Akatsuki-san had anticipated, Higashira-san's thinking had completely changed. Whenever she got herself ready to see Mizuto, her girliness score rose. She started as a one-out-of-ten, for sure, but now she was at least a four...though most girls were typically around a seven.

With that being said, just changing her eyes probably wouldn't be enough to get through a skull as thick as Mizuto's.

"What happened? You pull an all-nighter?"

The first time Mizuto saw her like this, he'd responded just as obliviously as I'd expected. *Seriously, screw this guy! Does he know how much effort it takes to apply mascara?!*

"You really wanna date *that* guy? Honestly, you should give up on him," Akatsuki-san had said.

"Hard agree."

"Y-Your harshness is unfounded... He was simply worried about my health."

That had all happened the other day. Now, I was standing in the kitchen, reminiscing about how purehearted Higashira-san was. *Can he realize her feelings for him? Or maybe blush a little? Or even just react in some way?! Don't just ignore her!*

"Why do you look like you wanna kill me?" my dense little stepbrother asked as I shot him a harsh look on behalf of Higashira-san.

"No reason. I was just thinking about how you'll be in a world of pain someday. Perhaps you'll be stabbed by some girl."

Mizuto took a step away from me, his face turning pale. *Wow, way to overreact.* I then cut up carrots with a kitchen knife for dinner.



Thus, a week had passed, and we were now in the middle of June. By this time, we'd gotten deeper into the rainy season, and the fruits of our labor had finally begun to show.

"Good afternoon, Mizuto-kun."

"Hey, Higashira..."

Higashira-san had continued regularly taking the time to put on makeup before meeting up with Mizuto, and thanks to that, she'd

arrive at the library after him, making him wait for her. Akatsuki-san had insisted she should put the makeup on before school entirely, but Higashira-san refused, saying that she was too sleepy in the morning. Honestly, though, she probably just didn't see any point in putting makeup on for anyone but Mizuto.

Just as usual, Higashira-san took off her socks and shoes and sat down. Operation: Titty Touchy-Feely was still in motion, so she scooted close to Mizuto, their shoulders barely not touching...but just as she did, Mizuto moved away.

Higashira-san looked up at him, puzzled, and then inched closer to him. Again, Mizuto moved away, leading to Higashira-san moving closer, and so on and so forth. They continued this game of tag until finally Mizuto had run out of space and was stuck in the corner by the window.

"Why do you keep running away, Mizuto-kun?"

"I like my personal space. I'll teach you the true meaning of hell if you encroach on my territory any more than this."

"Interesting. Then...how about you show me what hell looks like?!"

I watched as Mizuto suddenly vigorously mussed up Higashira-san's hair, like he was washing a dog. At the end of it all, her hair, which she'd taken the time to style, was now bedhead chic.

"Wh-What did you do that for?"

"I told you I'd teach you the true meaning of hell. Good for you; now you can practice fixing your messy hair."

"Huh?"

Higashira-san was not alone in her surprise. Both Akatsuki-san and I were right there with her. *He noticed? He noticed her change in appearance?!* Plus, his unnatural movements right now meant that he was more than likely trying to hide his embarrassment!

Mizuto then returned to reading, leaving Higashira-san lost and confused. For some reason, she began looking around, but then finally, she gripped her bangs.

"Th-This is bullying. I am being bullied."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Th-Then..." Higashira-san rummaged through her bag, eventually pulling out a comb. "You're okay being bullied with me, right, Mizuto-kun?" She nervously held the comb out to Mizuto.

Neither Akatsuki-san nor I knew what she was trying to do, but Mizuto looked at the comb and said, "Guess I don't have a choice." A light smile spread across his face as he accepted the comb and circled behind her.

He ran the comb through her ruffled hair, straightening it out. She leaned back into him like a dog enjoying being groomed.

“Hey, Yume-chan?” Akatsuki-san said while watching the two of them. “She can probably confess now, don’tcha think?”

I had no rebuttal.

The next day, we met up at the usual family restaurant.

“I-Impossible.” Higashira-san furiously shook her head in disagreement. “Th-The time is not right. There is no chance. A confession this early is imposs—”

“Naw, you’re good!”

“I am not ‘good’! This will *not* work out! There is absolutely no chance! No!” She pressed her face to the table and resumed shaking her head, like a child throwing a tantrum. I totally got where she was coming from though.

“Akatsuki-san? Maybe she should wait a little longer. I’m sure she needs time to prepare herself mentally.”

“P-Precisely! I need time to mentally prepare myself!”

“Mental preparation is whatever.”

“Huh?!”

“Listen here, you might think you have all the time in the world, but if you can’t do it now, you’ll never be able to! You really think you can pin your hopes and dreams on your future self?! Procrastinators are procrastilusers!” Akatsuki-san gulped down her melon soda. “Confessions only get harder the longer you put ‘em off ‘cause your relationship with your crush gets more set in stone. The longer you’re friends, the longer he’ll only see you as a friend, and if you confess outta nowhere, it’ll just put him on the spot. So really, the sooner you confess, the better. You’ll have a higher chance of him saying yes.” She paused. “That being said, confessing to someone right when you meet them is out of the question.”

Out of everything Akatsuki-san had ever said, I felt like that was the most serious I’d ever seen her. Maybe she had a similar experience when she liked someone for a while and kept putting off confessing.

“You’re still in the clear, Higashira-san. You’ve only known each other for two or three weeks, right? There’s still time for you to change his view of your relationship. Plus, who needs time to mentally prepare? There’s no guarantee that you’ll ever feel ‘ready.’ Just think of it like this: if you can’t confess now, you’ll never be able to.”

If I hadn’t confessed before summer break ended back then, I probably would have ended up just like Akatsuki-san had described—I wouldn’t have ever confessed at all. If I hadn’t been so elated and messed up in the head during that first month, I wouldn’t have even *thought* to confess. Romantic feelings burst like a bubble after you calm down and regain your senses.

“Hm... Truthfully, you may have a point. I am doubtful that I possess the courage to agonize over these feelings for an extended period of time and then confess like characters do in romantic comedies.”

“Right? Romance in real life doesn’t last years like it does in manga.”

“Um, it feels as if you’re saying that even if we do go out, we will immediately break up.”

“Just your imagination.”

“That is *precisely* what you are implying! S-Sensei, please, say it isn’t so! Romance is not so fleeting a thing, is it?! It can last for a long time, right?!”

“Yes. Uh-huh. Totally.”

“Please look me in the eyes!”

Please don’t ask someone who couldn’t even last an entire year!

“Well, putting aside how many months the two of you will be together—”

“Months?! Not years?!” Higashira-san interjected.

“I think you’re sitting pretty,” Akatsuki-san added. “I can’t see Irido-kun saying no. You’re not only cute, but also you two get along, and he’s single. I really think you got this!”

“You don’t know that...” Higashira-san ran her fingers through her hair as her shoulders shrunk. “My personality isn’t sunny or bright, and I can be frustrating to deal with. All I have...are my breasts.”

“Your confidence in your boobs really can’t be cracked, huh? Ah ha ha. How silly.” A bright smile spread across Akatsuki-san’s face, but behind it was a tangible anger. “Whaddya think, Yume-chan? She got a chance?”

I looked down at the table. I thought about that guy, how he spent his time, how he looked when he was with me, his words, and his nuances.

“He doesn’t care about the specs of girls whatsoever.” Then I thought about Mizuto when he was with Higashira-san. “When he’s with you, he looks like he’s having a good time. So if you tell him you want to spend more time with him, I doubt he’d say no.”

If she was the same kind of person that I had been back then, I’d have no clue how things would turn out, but she wasn’t. She was different. She and Mizuto truly got along with one another to the point that they were on the exact same wavelength. That’s why there was no need to put on airs; there was no need to hold back or pretend that they actually got along. She really was different from me and how I’d had to constantly watch my step.

I was sure that dating him, even without confidence, wouldn’t be a problem. After all, I knew best from experience. No matter how I

thought about it, the person most suited for Mizuto Irido was none other than Isana Higashira. She was so perfect for him that it was like I was just a speed bump on the way to her.

“Do you mean it?” Higashira-san asked in a cautiously hopeful whisper. “Can I really become his girlfriend?”

I could see myself in her as she desperately tried to move forward despite being so close to falling apart. But still, she wasn’t *exactly* like my middle school self. She wouldn’t ruin everything by saying anything extra—she wasn’t the foolish girl named Yume Ayai. The person I saw in her right now was the version of me who didn’t mess up and could have had a happy ending.

“Yes, you can.”

That’s why I needed to give her a push forward. Maybe she’d be able to see the things I couldn’t when she became his girlfriend. The pain I felt in my chest right now was dull compared to my sincere hope for her success.

“I guarantee it.” *As his ex.*

After that, we formulated a confession plan.

“Should I deliver a love letter to him?”

“Nah, that’s outdated. Can you imagine writing a poetic letter in the heat of the moment, late at night, without even a hint of calmness? Ew, I don’t think I’d be able to live with myself if I did that.”

“Gah!” *It was just an impulse—a folly of youth! I didn’t mean to write such an embarrassing letter!*

After some discussion, we ended up deciding that it’d be best to keep it simple and confess to him behind the school. This was where Commander Akatsuki Minami’s boot camp began.

“Repeat after me: ‘I like you. Please go out with me!’”

“I... I luh...ike yew! P-Pwease go out...”

“Don’t get tongue-tied! Stop getting embarrassed! Say it clear and say it proud! Do not falter!”

“You are asking too much of me!”

This went on for about a day.

(10:48) Izanami: He replied. 5:00 behind the school.

(10:48) Izanami: I feel nauseous.

(10:49) Akatsuki☆: nice! 5 is good! u two’ll be all by urselves. im sure irido-kun knows whats about to go down lol.

(10:49) Yume: If you’re going to throw up, let it all out today. You don’t want to confess with a foul-smelling mouth.

(10:50) **Akatsuki**☆: lmao u speakin from experience?

(10:50) **Yume**: No comment.

I had confessed with a love letter, myself, so I had to deal with the one-two punch of nausea *and* a stomachache as I watched him read my letter right in front of me. Of course, I couldn't just run off to the bathroom in that situation, so I had to hold it in.

(10:51) **Akatsuki**☆: 5 gives us plenty of time to prepare. I'll help you fix your hair and brows. Let's meet up after class tomorrow!

(10:51) **Izanami**: thank u v much

Higashira-san must have been very nervous if she couldn't even type like normal. Seeing that made me start to feel a little nervous too.

(10:52) **Akatsuki**☆: u want yume-chan to check out the scene? irido-kun's prob freakin the hell out

(10:53) **Izanami**: i will be nervs either way

(10:53) **Yume**: Maybe you should sleep now.

(10:54) **Izanami**: cant sleep

(10:54) **Akatsuki**☆: c'mon, girl. no thoughts, head empty. here, watch some funny vids

She followed that up by sending a few videos.

(10:54) **Izanami**: Thank you very much.

After that, she stopped sending messages. I just hoped that she wouldn't come to school the next day with bags under her eyes. Just as I was worrying about her, my phone rang. Akatsuki-san was calling me.

"Hello?"

"Oh boy, I'm nervous." She chuckled.

"Heh, me too. In the end, I didn't really help all that much. It was mostly you giving advice."

"That's not true! She would've given up a long time ago if it was just me."

"You think so?"

"Yeah, I do!" She sounded extremely confident.

"How's it feel, Yume-chan? Your little stepbrother's about to get a girlfriend."

"You're that certain it'll work out?"

"Yeah, I think so. Pretty natural to assume that it will."

“Natural?”

“Yeah. As long as neither of ’em *dislike* each other, there’s a higher chance of a successful confession. After all, if someone says they like you, isn’t that enough of a reason to try and like them back?”

Well...I guess she has a point. It makes sense to try and like the person who likes you. I guess you could call it natural.

“But then again, some people get grossed out when someone they’re not into has the hots for them. I’m one of those people, bee-tee-dubs.”

“Hey!”

“But on the flip side, they already like each other as friends, so Higashira-san should be fine, don’tcha think? They definitely think alike, and I’m sure he doesn’t want things to get awkward between the two of them. But more than anything, all he has to do is nod, and he gets himself a girlfriend. Even if he’s not into her like that right now, he might catch feelings as they go along. So, I think it’s pretty natural for him to just say ‘okay’ and see where things take him.”

“Maybe...”

“But then again, Irido-kun’s a pretty unnatural person,” Akatsuki-san continued, her voice tinged with bitterness. “If there’s anything I’m worried about, it’s that. Everything I said is assuming that the person sees value in having a girlfriend, but there’s a good chance that Irido-kun doesn’t.”

“He doesn’t?”

“Yeah, he’s totally a person who can live his entire life without a girlfriend. He doesn’t see any value in the status that comes with being in a relationship. So, that’s why if he *did* ever end up going out of his way to have a girlfriend...” she continued. The words she said next rang in my head so loudly that I almost forgot to breathe. “Well, anyway, this is all just in my head.” Akatsuki-san tried to play it off, but her words kept spinning around in my head like a merry-go-round.

If he did ever go out of his way to have a girlfriend... If he did, then I

“G’night, Yume-chan. Let’s do our best from the sidelines tomorrow!”

“Hm? Ah, right. Wait, why are you already assuming that we’ll be watching?”

“’Tis the duty of we, the ones who set her on this journey.”

At this point, I felt a little bit melancholic. *But why?* Before I could come up with an answer, I hung up and hid under my covers.

I couldn’t sleep. I kept tossing and turning and eventually decided to give up and get out of bed altogether. *Am I getting secondhand nervousness from Higashira-san? I should drink some water. Maybe that’ll*

calm me down.

I left my room, walked down the stairs and through the dark living room, and rooted around for the light switch. After living here for two months, I pretty much knew where it was from memory. As I flipped the switch, the living room filled with light, and that's when I realized that someone was on the couch.

"Eep!" I cried, prompting them to turn towards me. It was Mizuto, and he was really out of it—he didn't even *blink* when he saw me.

"Wh-What are you doing here in the dark?"

"Just...thinking." He looked up at the ceiling.

I bet he's thinking about Higashira-san. Even a dense idiot like him must've known that Higashira-san was going to confess to him tomorrow. As proof, he'd asked that they meet at a time when no one would be around. He knew what was going on and tried to casually be considerate.

I wondered if he was mulling over his options—would he accept the confession or not? To Higashira-san, entering a romantic relationship meant entering the next level of friendship. It wasn't getting rid of the relationship you already had; it was building on top of it. Even though she was going to confess to him, she wasn't going to change the way she acted around him.

The time it took her to realize her feelings could be considered an experimental period—a test of whether or not they could keep their current relationship if they ended up dating. It was a good idea. This way, she'd managed to prove her thesis: even if they dated, they wouldn't have to force themselves to act differently. Thus, Mizuto wouldn't be able to reject her on the basis of losing her as a friend. If that was the case, then the answer should've been easy.

Consequently, however, there was nowhere for her to run. All that was left was for Mizuto to figure out his feelings.

"Hey," Mizuto suddenly said while still staring at the ceiling.

"Hypothetically... Just hypothetically..." His voice was unsteady.

"What would you think if I...got a girlfriend?"

I felt a sudden pain in my chest, like a scar was throbbing. At the same time, I felt a rage seething inside me.

"Does it matter?" *There's no way—absolutely no way—that I'll do something so self-serving as taking Higashira-san's fate into my own hands.* "You should just do what *you* think is best."

I had no right to weigh in on this. He needed to make his own decision. He was the only one who could come up with an answer for her...no matter what it was.

"First Higashira, now you."

"Huh?"

"You're right—I should do what's best." He wryly smiled before

standing up and walking past me. As he did, I felt a light tap on my shoulder, and a soft “sorry” caressed my ears.

This one word he whispered in my ear dissipated like smoke as my ex disappeared up the stairs. I kept standing there for who knows how long before I poured water into my cup. The cold from it seeped through my body, but it wasn’t at all satisfying. I still felt every bit as empty as I had before, as if there was a hole inside me.

“Let’s break up.”

That’s what he’d said when we ended our relationship. I remembered the feeling of freedom and refreshment I had. *Oh, I see. I’ve never actually experienced being brokenhearted.*

“Okey dokey!” Akatsuki-san put down her brush and turned Higashira-san towards the mirror in the girls’ bathroom. “Whaddya think, girlie? I’ve done some fine work here, in my opinion.”

“I feel like a swindler.”

“I swear, it’s fine. I didn’t even do too much to you! For the millionth time, you’re cute, Higashira-san!”

“Still got that low self-appraisal, huh?” I remarked.

Though Higashira-san had learned how to put on lipstick and do her hair, there was a stark contrast between her version and Akatsuki-san’s. Higashira-san was the type who positively glowed with some makeup on her. Her height was just right, she was well proportioned, and while she might’ve been listless in the expressions department, I could still see her becoming some kind of gravure idol.

“She’s just like him. With a little effort on her attire, she turns into someone completely different.”

“Oh, so Irido-kun looks good in the right ’fit? Got any pics, Yume-chan?”

“I-I would very much like to see Mizuto-kun dressed up. Please share them!”

“O-Oh, sorry. I don’t have any... Unfortunate, I know...”

There was no way I could show them the album I had buried on my phone, especially not right when she was about to confess! I had no reason whatsoever to cause any kind of misunderstandings at this stage.

We headed to the back of the school, which was, as expected, deserted. At most, you could hear the wind ensemble and sports clubs in the distance. Most students, like us, just went home after school—there weren’t many people who participated in club activities, probably because this was a prep school. So it made sense that hardly anyone was around an hour after the end of the school day. It was the perfect time and place to confess.

“Okay, Higashira-san, just like we practiced! We’ll be watching.”

“I-I’ll do my utmost beth.” Expressionless as usual, but stiff as a board.

I gently patted her on the shoulder to try and give her some courage. “You can do this,” I declared as emphatically as possible. After all, if *I* could do it, she could do it.

Finally, she took a deep breath before slowly exhaling. “Farewell...”

Higashira-san hadn’t managed to totally shake off her stiffness, but she still confidently strode towards the meeting place. We watched in silence as she walked away.

“Looks like it’s true what they say about love changing a person,” Akatsuki-san whispered after she was gone.

“You’re saying that like you don’t already know from experience.”

“Well, in my case, I’m the type who changes, but in a bad way,” Akatsuki mumbled. She started moving forward, trying to play down what she said. “Come on, let’s go, Yume-chan. We need to see this through to the end.”

“Yes, let’s.”

I needed to see the other end of what could have been.

We walked over to a classroom right next to the spot where she’d confess and hid ourselves. We peeked out of the window and saw Higashira-san nervously kicking around a pebble for no particular reason while playing with her hair. Mizuto was still nowhere to be seen. From the corner of my eye, I noticed that Akatsuki-san was crouched down and rapidly tapping away at her phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Crowd control.”

The classroom was empty and so were the halls. Also, I didn’t think I’d noticed anyone in the neighboring classrooms either. Actually, it was kinda weird how empty it was, even if most of the students here were in the going-home club. So what exactly did Akatsuki-san mean by “crowd control”? What, I wondered, was she planning on doing?

Just as I was starting to feel something unfathomable from my very first high-school friend, a sound from outside interrupted me.

“There he is,” I whispered, prompting Akatsuki-san to tear her eyes away from her phone and stop moving her fingers altogether.

“I’m here, Higashira,” Mizuto said in a firm voice, standing right in front of Higashira-san.

His voice was filled with sincerity, seriousness, and preparedness. I was sure that Higashira-san could tell too. She could rest assured that all her hard work was not for nothing.

“U-Um, th-thank you for being so kind as to meet me here.”

“Sure.” Mizuto politely nodded.

In the meantime, I wondered what had happened to all that training we’d done. She was obviously still extremely nervous.

“S-So, u-uh, I-I have something that I w-would like to tell you, Mizuto-kun.”

“Yeah.”

“Y-You could call it an expression of gratitude... Although I suppose it’s just for a two-week period... Uh... N-No, please forget that. Wh-What I mean to say is, uh... Um...”

Higashira-san had completely lost all sense of calm. She anxiously gripped the hair we’d fixed for her and groaned in anguish.

Akatsuki-san sighed and looked away, presumably because it was too painful to watch. But I didn’t take my eyes off of them. I knew that this wasn’t enough to make her implode.

“Calm down and slowly say what you want to, in the order that you want to say it,” Mizuto said at a relaxed tempo that matched Higashira-san’s. “I’ll do my best to interpret whatever it may be. I spend all my time with my nose in books. Who would I be if I couldn’t read between the lines?”

There it is. That’s the kind voice that made her fall for him. Higashira-san peered up at him and heaved a sigh. Then, the words she’d been holding inside of her started to come out.

“Do you recall when we bumped into each other in the library, and you talked to me?”

“Yeah.”

“I was so happy... It made me so pleased to find someone who shared my interests, but I was even more surprised by the fact that you were never bothered by any topic I brought up. I’ve always been the odd one out. People constantly label me as eccentric and annoying to deal with.”

“Yeah.”

“Whenever I ramble on, I find that there is no one who truly listens. You were the first one to do so and actually reply to me... You *are* the first. It has made me so happy, and I truly, truly find great enjoyment being around you.” Higashira-san finally looked him in the eye. “I want to spend more time with you.”

There was a slight tremble in her voice, but she did not waver.

“I want to spend *all* my time with you.”

Like she was looking for somewhere she could belong.

“That is why I would like you to take me as your girlfriend.” Her final words rolled off her tongue as if they flowed right out of her heart. “I like you.”

Those three words were simple, but powerful enough to make everything go quiet. There was no way that he didn’t understand how

she felt about him now. No matter how thick his skull was, her words had enough power to pierce right through it. I forgot to even breathe as I stared at Mizuto's face. He looked back into Higashira-san's eyes and then his lips loosened into a smile.

"Weren't you the one who kept insisting that we're just friends?"

"Th-That was not a lie! I-I really do consider us friends!"

"I have fun with you too, Higashira."

A soft breeze blew past them, but it wasn't strong enough to rustle the leaves or make even a strand of hair move. What felt like a frigid wind brushed past my heart.

"I don't think I've ever met someone that I've gotten along with this well. I bet we'd both have the time of our lives if we dated. Sure, we might get into the occasional fight, but we'd probably forget all about it when we inevitably started talking about a new book."

"Ah..." I shut my eyes. What was wrong with me? I had been able to watch them until now, but for some reason I couldn't do it anymore. *I know what he's going to say next.*

A gentle smile—softer than any I'd ever seen him make—filled his face. It was tinged with embarrassment, but he still firmly looked right at her. *Here it comes.*

"But...I'm sorry."



Huh? My eyes widened. *What did he say?* Those were the words opposite the ones I had expected.

"I'm really sorry, but I can't date you."

Akatsuki-san, Higashira-san, and I were all confused beyond disbelief.

"Wh-Why not?" she asked, her voice trembling. His response was illogical—we all knew that—and it was written all over her face. "I-Is it because you do not perceive me as a girl?"

"No, not at all. I'm a guy, Higashira. I'm not left mentally unscathed when a pair of boobs is pressed against me. Not even if they're the boobs of my friend. Regrettably, I don't think I can separate romance from friendship in my head."

"Th-Then—"

"I thought about it; I really did. Calmly." A grimace filled his face. "I tried reassessing myself and my emotions, and I found that my small heart only has room for one more in it." It was like he was mocking himself. "I'm a petty guy. I only have the capacity to truly face one person right now, and that seat is already filled, though she has no right to it."

Oh...

"And so, even if I have no obligation to her whatsoever, I still don't want to make her cry."

As his words seeped into my heart, I could feel tears welling up in my eyes.

"So, I'm sorry. Seriously, I'm so, so sorry. I'm so sorry that I'm saying no because of someone else. It has nothing to do with who you are—you're perfect. It's not your fault or anyone else's. This is my problem—my feelings are the problem."

His "sorry" echoed in my head.

"I'm really sorry, Higashira, but I can't take you as my girlfriend."

Then suddenly, Akatsuki-san's words replayed in my head.

"So, that's why if he did ever end up going out of his way to have a girlfriend...I think it'd be someone that he doesn't necessarily see as needing to have value, or having to be proud of. It'd just be someone he wanted to be with."

I leaned against the wall and slid to the ground, landing on my knees.

Why are you so stupid?! You could've been happy! Your happy ending was waiting for you. The two of us are just stepsiblings. Why... Why are you still bothering with someone who isn't even your girlfriend? Why are you letting me stay by your side?

"Aw, man." Akatsuki-san frowned. "Now *both* of you are crying."

"I-I'm not c-cryingggg!"

“You must really like him, huh?”

“I d-doon’t!” *I don’t like him. Not anymore, but...I’m still by his side. What am I supposed to do? I’m so, so...happy.*

“You two are so weird,” Akatsuki-san muttered. Maybe I was imagining it, but I could’ve sworn she was pouting. “So weird.”



I have absolutely no clue what happened after that. I wasn’t able to see how Higashira-san reacted to Mizuto’s answer, or how things were settled between the two of them. They both disappeared somewhere while Akatsuki-san comforted me.

I felt really guilty about Higashira-san. I was one of the people who’d pushed her into confessing, but then I was happy when she was rejected. I’d even cried tears of joy when Mizuto cited me as the reason he couldn’t date her.

I was rotten to the core. I wouldn’t complain no matter how hard Higashira-san wanted to hit me. However, the guilt I felt was so immense that I couldn’t bring myself to face her. Even the day after, I couldn’t send her a single message. But she didn’t message me either.

I thought back to the night before she confessed and how empty I had felt. Surely, she felt the same way now. Even if I wanted to try and console her, I didn’t have any right to do so.

Ultimately, I spent the entire day of classes agonizing over this.

“Let’s have a consolation party,” Akatsuki-san suggested as we exited the school building. “We *are* partially responsible for how things turned out. Plus...Irido-kun was her one friend, and now everything’s all screwed up.”

Hearing her say that made me feel even worse. “Right... Things can’t go back to normal with them.”

If we hadn’t lit the fuse, Higashira-san would have still been friends with Mizuto. I couldn’t keep avoiding her.

“It won’t make it all better, but the least we can do is be there for her, right? I mean, it’s kinda our fault she was even on this path. Let’s cheer her up and make her feel better. Then, at the end of it all, we can all be friends.”

“I don’t know... I have no clue how to interact with her.”

I never expected to be the reason for her rejection, so how was I supposed to console her?

“Aw, don’t worry! All you gotta do is focus on dissing Irido-kun and his shitty rejection.” She gave me a bright smile.

“Oh! If that’s the case, then definitely count me in!”

“And then Higashira-san can go all-out dissing *us*. It’s only fair.”

“Yes... Count me in for that too.”

I had no choice but to follow her lead and accept. Higashira-san

was the victim here. We had irresponsibly egged her on, and then she ended up getting rejected by that tactless bastard. I mean, there had to have been a better way for him to say no, right?

“All right, I’m gonna call. You ready?”

“Yes, I am.”

Immediately after I replied, Akatsuki-san began dialing. I took deep breath after deep breath, and tried not to look down. If I did, I was certain that I’d fall into an even deeper melancholy. I needed to force myself to keep my head up and—

Huh? What’s going on? What is this impossible scene?! I shakily pointed with disbelief at the school library’s window. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

“A-Akatsuki-san... Look...”

“Hm? Hm?!” Akatsuki-san froze when she saw what I was pointing at.

Sitting there—right next to each other and happily chatting away—were Mizuto Irido and Isana Higashira.

While we stared in silence, Higashira-san picked up her phone.

“Yes? Hello?”

“Get your butt down here!” Akatsuki-san and I yelled.

“Huh?! ”

“What the heck was that?!” Both Akatsuki-san and I practically screamed in sync.

Our consolation party had turned into an interrogation, the location of which was the usual family restaurant.

“What exactly are you referring to?” Higashira-san asked, tilting her head. She nonchalantly slurped up her drink through its straw.

“Why are you just hanging out with him like nothing happened?!” I asked.

“You were rejected yesterday, right?! He broke your heart into a million pieces, right?! So what gives? Did you flip the script or something when we weren’t looking?!”

“I am not certain about a million pieces, but yes, I am heartbroken.”

“So...” I started.

“Why?!” Akatsuki-san shouted.

“Um... I apologize, but I haven’t a clue as to what you are so upset about,” she said, furrowing her brow in confusion.

You want us to explain?! You should be explaining yourself to us!

“We felt responsible! We’re the ones who pushed you to confess, and we thought that you two might not even be friends anymore now!”

“I do not understand. I believe you may have your logic

backwards.”

“Huh?!” Akatsuki-san and I screeched in confusion.

“It was actually quite a relief to be rejected in such a direct manner. If anything, since I know where I stand, it’s simple to fully focus on being just friends.” This freshly rejected, big-boobed girl made such a statement like it was common sense, leaving us speechless.

So she got on board with our plan because she was already confident she had nothing to lose?! I shivered in fear in the face of this puzzled-looking girl. She was almost...*alien*.

“I... I don’t get it. I don’t get young’uns these days at all, Yume-chan!”

“It’s okay! Calm down; I have no clue either!”

“I sincerely apologize for any distress I may have caused the two of you. Certainly, it pained me to be rejected for the first time in my life, but as you can see, I am perfectly fine. After all, Mizuto-kun consoled me yesterday.”

“Excuse me?!” Akatsuki-san and I nearly screamed in unison once again.

“He told me to think about this calmly. ‘People you date in high school are a dime a dozen, but the friends you make can be for life,’ he said. And I completely agree with that sentiment.”

“I can’t keep up with this anymore!”

“Stop dismantling our common sense!”

I felt like such a fool for worrying about whether or not I had the right to console her now that I knew she’d been consoled by the person with the least right to do so! I had a strong feeling that this conversation wasn’t going to go anywhere. Our values were just way too different.

We decided to call the other person who was involved in this.

“Hello?”

“Hello. I’d like to ask you about the girl you rejected yesterday,” I said accusingly.

“Uh, why do you know that Higashira confessed to me yesterday?”

“Never mind that!”

“I *do* mind!”

“Did you *really* console Higashira-san after rejecting her?!”

“Oh, that? I don’t know who you heard it from, but don’t worry.”

“About what?!”

“I don’t know how things turned out like that either.” His voice was filled with confusion.

Akatsuki-san and I looked at Higashira-san, who was currently staring intently at the maze for kids that came with the menu. We

grimaced. At least we weren't the weird ones here.

"Alien."

"Yep, she's an alien, all right."

"Huh? Why are you two suddenly treating me as an extraterrestrial?"

There was someone here who clearly had different values than us, and we'd learned that firsthand. My thoughts were interrupted by a low voice that came out from Mizuto's end.

"Hey, Irido..."

"Crap." Akatsuki-san's face soured.

Was that Kawanami-kun? He was the only person I could think of that Mizuto'd hang out with.

"I thought I heard something about confessing, but who are you talkin' about?"

"Oh, right, I guess I haven't told you. Higashira—"

"Wait, no! Stop! Don't talk about her!" Akatsuki exclaimed.

"Hey, who's that? A girl? There's another girl in your life besides Irido-san?!"

"God dammit. I worked so hard to make sure he didn't find out!" Akatsuki-san frantically gathered her things and stood up. "Sorry, I gotta run and pacify a certain annoying pervert."

She dropped the money for the drink bar on the table and dashed out of the family restaurant, leaving only Higashira-san and me.

As I watched her disappear out of sight, I whispered, "Surprisingly, everyone has someone in their life who feels like they're from a different world."

"Oh, that is very introspective! Are you referring to the fact that even when people are transported to a different world, like in the isekai genre, they do not change who they are at their core?"

No two people are alike. No two romances are alike.

My first love had ended, but there was something still continuing, and I was struggling to put a name to it.

Afterword: Happy Reiwa!

I remember seeing a commercial for a Japanese wedding information magazine called *Zexy* a while back. They had this catchphrase I heard a lot: “Even if we live in a time when people can find happiness without getting married, I want to get married to you.”

This book was supposed to come out on the first of May, with the change of the Heisei era to the Reiwa era. During the thirty-year Heisei period, birth rates continued to decline, the average age of marriage rose, and with that, certain values began to change. Just as *Zexy* said, marriage was no longer a required event, and not having a romantic partner wasn’t abnormal.

Even if you aren’t in a relationship, you can still hang out with friends. If you don’t have friends, you can just play games or read books. All of these are equivalent in value; none of them are higher or lower than the other. This is where the method of achieving happiness begins to differ for everyone. So, if everyone’s source of happiness is different, then it shouldn’t be a problem for a romantic-comedy heroine to be just a friend, right?

That is where the invincible heroine Isana Higashira comes in. What I mean by invincible is that even if she doesn’t succeed in her romance, she doesn’t actually *lose*. A broken heart isn’t that painful to her. In her mind, happiness is not determined by getting a boyfriend, getting married, becoming a wife, and being blessed with children. No, all she wants is to be able to have someone to talk about light novels with.

In a series where all the main characters have scars from their various relationships, she certainly has values that make them see her as an alien. Just as people from different worlds can bestow a different point of view on the main characters, her existence helps to influence the main characters around her.

Nowadays, being in a relationship isn’t nearly as special as it used to be. So, in that case, what kind of relationship leads to the most happiness? Just as happiness is becoming more diverse, so are human relations.

It’s a good question, though. Truth be told, I’m out of web stories.

Thank you so much to my editor. To the illustrator, Takaya-ki. To all the people who helped on this book. And of course, thanks to you, the reader. I’d like to take this small part of the book to truly thank all

of you. Thanks to you, the first volume has been republished! All of you made this possible!

So with that, I'd like to conclude the second volume of *My Stepmom's Daughter is My Ex: "Even if We Aren't Dating..."* This has been the author, Kyosuke Kamishiro. See you in volume three!



My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex 2

"Even If We Aren't Dating..."



Kogure Kawanami

A classmate of Mizuto and Yume. Something may have happened between him and Akatsuki in the past.

Akatsuki Minami

A classmate of Mizuto and Yume. Recently, she's been inseparable from Yume.

Yume Irido

Mizuto's ex and stepsister. Had a successful high school glow-up in both looks and books.

Mizuto Irido

Yume's ex and stepbrother. A loner and avid book reader.

"Our romantic dinner for two is over..."

"I'm just saying it's unusual for a high schooler to not know how to use the drink bar. Have you never been to a family restaurant with your friends?"

"What do you mean 'romantic'? This is a family restaurant."

"Hey, my dear younger stepsister, do you mind explaining the look you're giving me? It's really pissing me off."





The school-assigned shoes were on the floor with her socks rolled into a ball and stuffed into them, leaving her barefoot. She was bent forward and resting her head on her knees while blankly staring at a book.

"I think of you as a friend."

Isana Higashira

A loner and avid light novel reader. Befriended Mizuto due to their shared book-reading hobby. Hangs out with Mizuto every day after school.



Phew, my shoulders are stiff. Please rub them for me, Mizuto-kun. It is easy to get stiff shoulders when you have a large chest. I can no longer move... I may need to stay here on your bed until I am a mere skeleton. Oh, dearie me! *rolls around*

Okay already!
Stop rubbing your scent all over my bed!



Be gentle with me, please... Hngh!
Y-Yes, please continue... Ahn!

Okay, seriously,
what are you playing at?



I'm reenacting the very popular light novel trope of doing something perfectly innocent while acting as though it is dirty.

Why are you two so close?!
Are you sure you're not actually dating?!



Whatever do you mean? We've been like this from the beginning, right, Mizuto-kun?

Yeah, sounds about right. We're friends, so...



Wait, I got it! Since neither of you have ever had friends before, you don't have personal space bubbles!



How rude. I have at least...one friend...

Well... Everyone's personal space bubble is different, right?



Whatever! Get off both the bed and each other before you start making excuses!



See you in Volume 3!

▶ Author
Kyosuke
Kamishiro

▶ Illustrator
TakayaKi



My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex

"Even If We Aren't Dating..."

2



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My Stepmom's Daughter Is My Ex: Volume 2
by Kyosuke Kamishiro

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Tokyo

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Ebook edition 1.0: May 2022